

# Visit With S. Y. Agnon

By JAMES FERON

JERUSALEM.

THE Municipality of Jerusalem decided recently to erect a cautionary sign at the entrance of what had once been one of the most peaceful streets in town. It will read:

"Quiet. Agnon Is Writing."

S. Y. Agnon has been writing for six decades, the last three in the simple house hidden by tall firs in the residential Talpioth section. His way of life, like his way of writing, has remained unchanged, but the neighborhood, like his audience, is changing around him. "When I came here they assured me that this was the last house. I would rise with the first rays of the sun and look at the Dead Sea and the Hills of Judea. As I approached the age of 50, I thought to cut off contact with the world, but one day when I went up to the balcony I was terrified. I saw people. I thought I wouldn't see a person and they wouldn't see me."

Now a hotel has been built in the few hundred yards between the 78-year-old novelist and the Jordanian border. The sounds of grinding gears and raucous farewells cut boldly through the trees. "This is a plague that was not listed in the Torah." He points to a newspaper story describing Mayor Teddy Kolek's bid to bring some solitude to the writer. "You see, I should have gained fame because of my stories and in the end I become known because of this sign."

Shmuel Yosef Agnon's fame has indeed grown from his stories. He is regarded as the foremost writer in the Hebrew language and has been men-

tioned for the Nobel prize. His prose almost defies translation. A deep vein of irony and mischievous humor runs through his stories, as it does through his conversation. He is deeply rooted in the Bible.

Agnon is still at work, but he feels the loss of many of his old readers. "There were many, but the six million Jews that Hitler killed—the sages and writers and artists and modest readers who would sit and read and enjoy each and every word, who would not make themselves conspicuous and not say, 'Here, I am your reader!'—these are missing. I can tell you something. Once there came here a Jew from Russia. For 35 years he had been a *buchhalter* (book-keeper) in a small village. He wrote a letter to Khrushchev when Khrushchev was still the Czar and said, 'I'm a religious man and I want to observe the religion in the last years of my life. I've already worked for 35 years and there have been no complaints against me so let me go to my country.'

"He came to a *maabara* [Israeli immigrant camp] and after a while requested permission to come to Jerusalem to see me because he used to read my words. He said he wanted before he died to see me. Such readers I probably had in the hundreds. And now they have disappeared. The young generation has other interests."

A diminutive, brisk man with light blue eyes and white hair, Agnon speaks with a gentle courtliness. He jumps up to invite his wife to join the conversation ("she's very shy") and asks his guest whether he wants cognac "now or later." He urges fruit upon everyone, explains that the grapes must be blessed both before and after eating.

He apologizes for not being able to speak English. "I have been sitting in Palestine nearly 60 years—during that period I was also in Germany—but since I returned it's 44 years. During all those 44 years I could have learned English. But I made a contract with the Almighty, that for every language I did not learn he would give me a few words in Hebrew. You know, there's a joke among the Africans. They believe that monkeys are able to talk but in order that they should not be sold as slaves, they don't talk. And I, in order that I shouldn't have to go many places, I don't learn English. And if some gentleman wants to come from abroad, I say I don't speak English. They don't come and in this way I gain a lot."

AGNON has no mass appeal in the Israel of 1966, yet his works have acquired the status of classics. They are required reading in Israel high schools and universities and there must be some among these younger readers who believe the stories were written hundreds of years ago. "The question is whether they are also suitable for this time. Everything good is beyond time, abstract of time, at all times it is good. There is a saying that the Zohar (the mystic book of the Cabalists) is translated in Heaven with a new interpretation every day. Everything genuine is always topical.

"I am not a modern writer. I am astounded that I have even one reader. I don't see the reader before me. I'll tell you, simply and truly, I never wanted to know the reader. I wanted to work in my own way. You know, when the bull chews the grass he doesn't want people to watch—how he chews and how much he chews.

"No, I see before me only the Hebrew letter saying 'write me thus and not thus.' I, to my regret, am like the wicked Balaam. It is written of him 'the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak.'"

Agnon was born in Poland's Galicia. His stories, like his style of Hebrew, reflect the time and place of the *shtetls*, the villages, of eastern Europe. He says he knows many of Israel's young writers but he does not read their works. "I am sorry about every writer whose works I do not read. Most of them are my friends and I want them to succeed, especially the young. If there are no kids there are no goats. But I read very little. My eyes are not good. If I read, it is the Talmud."

He says that there seemed to be more interest in literature years ago. "Now, the talented brains deal with politics. You know, Ibsen said the greatness of the Jews throughout the gen-

erations was that they did not have a state. Consequently, all the good heads, the good brains, dealt with art, thought, literature, poetry. The greatness of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev was that they were not allowed to deal with politics."

Agnon built his house after the Arab riots of 1929. "I lived not far from here, and after the pogrom I pledged an oath that I would build a house on the place from which they wanted to chase me away. Come, let me show you upstairs. I have many precious things."

The library is filled from ceiling to floor. Many of the books are hundreds of years old and they speak of the author's deep immersion in Judaism. "These are the prayer books and they face the Western Wall [of the Temple, the 'Wailing Wall' now in the Jordanian sector of Jerusalem]. Here I have the Bible, and here the Talmud. Here I have philosophy, Jewish philosophy."

Each sweep of his arm covers hundreds of books. "Here I have the Responses, here the Mystics, here the Cabala and here I have the Hasidic works." Finally, he indicates a narrow shelf near the door, the smallest group in the room. "This is the modern literature."

He opens a cupboard in an alcove and pulls out a 600-year-old manuscript from Spain. "Half of it is here, half in Oxford." He indicates a packet of pages on a shelf. "This is a

## A Blending

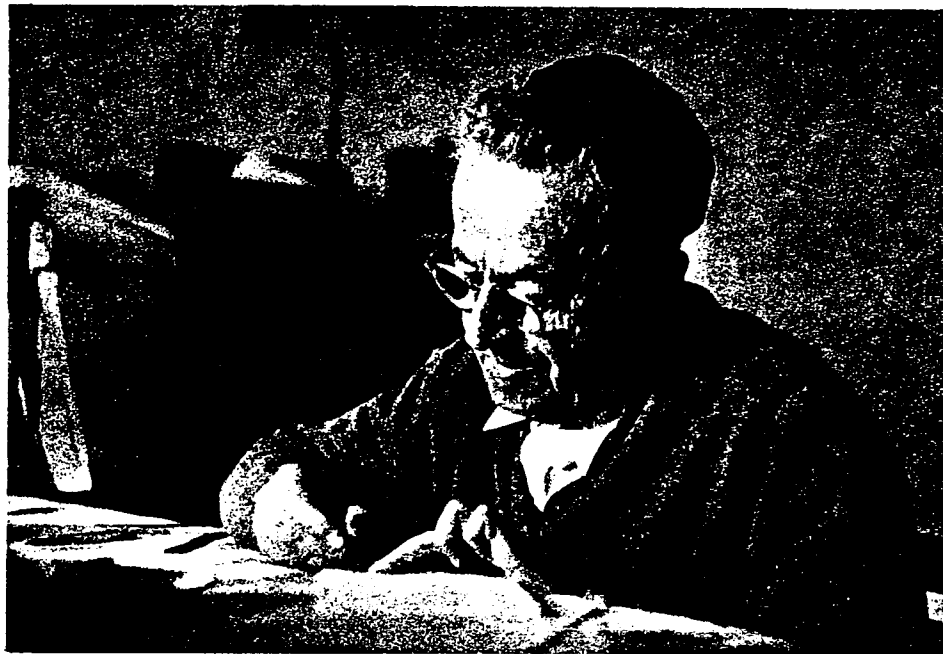
TWO TALES: *Betrothed* and *Edo and Enam*. By S. Y. Agnon. Translated by Walter Lever from the Hebrew, "Shevuat Emunim" and "Edo ve-Enam." 237 pp. New York: Schocken Books. \$4.95.

By CURT LEVIANT

ALTHOUGH S. Y. Agnon is one of the geniuses of modern Hebrew literature, his vast output remains virtually unknown to a wide English-reading public. Except for stories in periodicals and anthologies, only two novels, "The Bridal Canopy" and "In the Heart of the Seas," have previously appeared in English.

His themes and approaches to literature show a remarkable affinity with those of other modern writers. Like Joyce, he makes his co-religionists a paradigm for the state of 20th-century man; like Eliot, he affirms a literary tradition from which he draws language, symbols and images in profusion; like Mann, he portrays an era and its tot-

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S. Y. Agnon.

novel. My wife retrieved the pages from the waste basket because I always use the back side to write on. She made me swear not to use them—it's a *mitzva* [good deed] to obey your wife—and she bound them up."

He has files of original material covering 300 years of Jerusalem's history. He opens a ledger with 350 years of his family's history. "You can see the handwriting from several generations, references to family quarrels—each one writes about his ancestors."

Agnon writes in a study downstairs—a fairly small room with books lining two walls, a huge desk near the center, a bed

against one wall and a small bureau with a slanted top—unlike a lectern—against the wall. "When I was healthy I used to work standing. I felt myself fresh and good and sometimes worked that way all day and into the night. I recommend it to every writer. But now I must sit to work and keep this . . ."—he lifts a bottle of nitroglycerine from his desk—"for the heart condition I have had for 15 years."

He says he tries to write every day but "one day is not like another. Also in Heaven one day is not like another. There are days when my head is a complete muddle and I can't even read a newspaper. And

there are days when a thousand runners could not keep up with my hand in writing. And it turns out that in those days when I have nothing to do, nobody bothers me. And those days when I do work I have lots of people disturbing me. But, really, I have no pretensions. When the first interviewer came I asked 'why do you want to interview me? Because you think I am a writer? If I am a writer whatever I have to say I can write myself.' Now when someone comes I feel like the man who sits in the cellar and is astonished when they open the door that there is still some light. In the same way I am astonished that there is still interest in me."

## of Memory, Illusion and Reality

tering civilization with prophetic fervor; and, like Kafka, he senses the problems of the individual trapped in the maze of a complex world.

Via realistic and surrealist modes, he has transmuted in his many works the tensions inherent in modern man's loss of innocence, and his spiritual turmoil when removed from home, homeland and faith. These themes are explored in dazzling counterpoint in "Two Tales," whose textured prose is carefully translated by Walter Lever.

The novella "Betrothed" focuses upon Jacob Rechnitz, a young teacher and marine biologist in Jaffa. As in much of Agnon's fiction, the worlds of memory, illusion and reality blend, and the story alternates between Jacob's life in Palestine and his sensuous recall of childhood in Europe. Jacob casually courts six girls, but his seaweed specimens are his only real love. One day his old friends, Consul Ehrlich and his daughter, Susan, come to visit Palestine after a lengthy, un-

satisfying world tour. Restive and melancholy, Susan reminds the seemingly passive Jacob of their childhood vow of eternal fidelity. Yet love appears to be orphaned, for Susan develops sleeping sickness, and Jacob prepares for a university post abroad. Finally, in a race where Jacob's six girl friends compete for a seaweed wreath, another figure—Susan, asleep—wins race and wreath, and, we suspect, Jacob as well.

Juxtaposed with the sunny, basically tranquil mood of pre-World War I Jaffa is the moonlit, disturbed Jerusalem of "Edo and Enam." Here, after World War II, a one-eyed bookseller searches for his somnambulist wife, and for the magic charms that can cure her. Involved, as well, are the unnamed narrator and a philologist who has discovered the lost languages of Edo and Enam. The suspenseful plot (too intricate for brief summary) unfolds on a multilevel stage. Fluid in time and space, "Edo and Enam" exudes a bewitching, fairy-tale atmosphere—

though its heroes, homeless and spiritually dislocated, do not live happily ever after.

There is dynamic interplay between these novellas, both in their similarities—scholars, sleepwalking heroines, the power of the past, unfulfilled love—and in the more striking contrasts: the vibrant reality, the repeated references to flowers, sea and spring of "Betrothed," the unreal aura of "Edo and Enam," with its nexus of night, malaise and death.

"Two Tales" displays the two-sided coin of despondency and hope, a duality of outlook that reflects Agnon's dispassionate literary objectivity. Taken as a unit, these tales contain the essence of the epic superstructure that one of the world's great authors has erected after nearly 60 years of continuous, serious productivity.

With "Two Tales" published, and a major Agnon novel, "A Guest for the Night," forthcoming, perhaps we should petition for a volume—surely long overdue—containing a generous selection of his masterly shorter works.