

Reading Agnon in China

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“One inquiry leads to another,” the shamash in *The Parable and Its Lesson* tells the beit din, “like one mouse that squeals out to another until very soon a whole horde of them come and chew up all the clothing and household goods”— not a happy comparison in context, but a fitting metaphor for the way Agnon has lately swept across my literary landscape.

Throughout 2016, a good friend on an English-language literary forum called [The Fictional Woods](#) wrote often and admiringly of [Robert Alter’s rendition of the Hebrew Bible](#), through which he was working his way that year. Following his recommendation, I bought *The Five Books of Moses* and was enraptured by the beauty of Alter’s English translation and the erudition and fluency of his commentary. The deeper I read the more my admiration grew. I began to learn more about Alter, thus stumbling on his [2017 piece for The New York Review of Books](#), about Rabbi Jeffrey Saks’ Agnon series for [Toby Press](#).

The essay is a most enticing introduction to Agnon, its highpoint Alter’s analysis of the 1938 story “In the Forest and in the Town.” I wrote to Saks, who heads the Research Department at the [Agnon House in Jerusalem](#), to inquire which volume I might find the story in. He kindly wrote back, and knowing that I am a native Polish speaker, he sent a Polish translation of “Fable of the Goat.” I read it and could not believe a story so magnificent, so funny and wise and touching and strange, so rich and yet so compact, existed.

In the year or so that has passed since Saks shared “Fable of the Goat” with me, I have read eight of Agnon’s books—three of them twice—and am now making my intoxicated, leisurely, and marveling way through [A Guest for the Night](#) and the English edition of [A City in Its Fullness](#). All that I have read of Agnon’s has touched and shaken me, if not on first encounter, then on second, and I am convinced I will be rereading his fiction for as long as circumstances allow me to do so. His work bursts with brilliant characterization, descriptive power, evocative ambiguity, complex use of narrative voices (I treasure Agnon’s unusual and commanding narrators), gorgeous imagery both grand and quiet, poetic passages, a beyond-beautiful prose style (for my glimpses of which, since I am reading in translation, I am indebted to Agnon’s host of English mediums), and above all, a tender, wise understanding of what it means to live and hope and love and suffer, to look for God, worship God, question and contemplate His presence, and embrace and struggle with His commandments.

I was born in Warsaw, Poland, twelve hours’ drive from the city that today is called Buchach, Ukraine. My mother and older siblings wasted no time guiding me into the



world of books they dwelled joyfully and wonderingly in. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, in Maria Skibniewska's lyrical Polish translation, was bedtime reading when I was five. When I was six, my family moved to New York.

I majored in literature at Queens College. I myself am not Jewish, but became close with many Orthodox Jewish classmates, took a class on Kafka and read articles by Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, and read widely in world literature—yet, in my American years, Agnon and I did not meet. When I graduated in 2013, a desperate search for congenial work combined with a lifelong interest in East Asia brought me to China. It was in China that I discovered Agnon, and it is in China that BookDepository.com has been depositing volume after volume of English-language Agnon to the overseas teachers' mail-sorting office, in [Xiamen's Jimei University](#), where I am an instructor of literature.

This past semester, I taught the Chinese translation of [A Simple Story](#) in a world literature seminar. Whereas the stories of Kawabata Yasunari or a novel like *Steppenwolf* were fairly safe bets, I did not know what a class of irreligious eighteen and nineteen-year-old Chinese students would make of Szybusz and its cheeky, digressive chronicler with his frequent invocations of "God in heaven," but I trusted in my ability to communicate my love and awe of the book and writer. Against my expectations, the students were more receptive to Agnon than to almost any of the other writers we covered that term, and they discussed *A Simple Story* with urgency, fervor, and obvious appreciation.

The evening after I started teaching the novel, I spoke to my wife about how pleased and surprised I was that the students were open to Agnon. My native-born Chinese wife countered that perhaps their reaction was not so surprising—after all, she said, many college students, even in a large city like the one we live in, come from towns as relatively parochial as Szybusz would have been in Galicia, towns in which matchmaking remains a lucrative profession and the approval or disapproval of parents weighs very heavily indeed on a child's choice of a partner or spouse. Whether to go along with or fight against your parents' wishes when they clash with what you might wish for yourself, and to what extent it's worth insisting on the obscure possibilities of romantic love over and against familial and social pressures to marry as soon as one's schooling is over, through the offices of a matchmaker if need be, and to have children right away—these are pressing issues for many young Chinese. Little wonder, then, that Hirshl's fumbblings around Blume, his misery with Mina, his breakdown, and his ultimate return to the Szybusz fold, met with identification, interest, and sympathy.

Only one student ever remarked on the religious language of Agnon's narrator, but most of the other perennial issues that have attended *A Simple Story* since its publication arose organically in our classroom, without my even needing to bring them up. The students dwelled on them and argued about them with the frequent reference to telling details that's the best proof of careful reading. Was the story really simple, they wondered, and what in the world were they to make of the ending? What did the *narrator* make of the ending? Or of the story as a whole, for that matter? Who ought Hirshl have gotten together with? Where and how did his and Blume's relationship go wrong? What will become of Hirshl? And what will become of Blume?

Those who love reading are aware that a great work of art is capable of shattering boundaries of time, space, upbringing, and background, that "the fiery arc of human emotion [can] leap and close the gap," as Ursula K. Le Guin puts it. It was my privilege to have watched this phenomenon happen with Agnon, his poor Hirshl, and my students in the Chinese city by the sea.