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THE KERNEL*

Aharon Appelfeld

When years ago I first read S. Y Agnon's novel *A Guest for the Night*, I felt as if it were revealing some of my most intimate secrets. I was born not far from Agnon's hometown. My late father knew Agnon's hometown, whose name he used to pronounce "Biczacz," rather than Buczacz, as I heard it pronounced in Israel. The region in which it was located partook of some of the charm of the Hapsburgs, years after the collapse of the Empire.

During the long summer vacations we would travel to rural towns. Already then I was able to see, from a child's point of view of course, the signs of decay scattered on the surface of the tranquil declining life of these small villages. It was the 1930s. Who imagined then that this life was already doomed? Agnon's novel revealed to me something of the fading light of my childhood, of the smells of large houses abandoned by sons to the sorrow of their elderly parents. I still remember the elderly people staring blankly upon the thresholds of empty study houses. It was a slow, penetrating decay.

As I read Agnon's novel, I recoiled at the premature decree to which he condemned his hometown. It seemed to me that if he had known what would be its fate he would not have written that way. I was alarmed at the thought that occurred to me that, in point of fact, the Holocaust actually completed an internal process that would have inevitably led to complete destruction. I did not comprehend then the dialectical connection between internal and external forces. I recoiled at the thought that the disintegration from within induced the violence from without. Even the yearnings for the distant Land of Israel did not seem to me to be equal to the disaster.

Years passed, and my relationship to Agnon underwent many changes. But that is not what I wish to speak about now. I wish to speak

* The original Hebrew version of this essay, "Hagarin," may be found in Aharon Appelfeld, *Masot beguf rishon* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1979), 101-7. It is translated by David C. Jacobson.

about the Holocaust as an experience with deep roots in time and about the individuals for whom the Holocaust arrived at the height of the process of assimilation. I will not get into a statistical discussion of how many Jews were in this situation. To my estimation, the majority of the Jewish intelligentsia, even in Eastern Europe, was engaged to some degree in a process of slowly but consistently cutting themselves off from their Jewish roots. I do not exempt the great Jewish movements that were active between the world wars. Even for those members of the intelligentsia who never left the Jewish collective, the relationship to Jewish sources was at least ambivalent if not negative. Hebrew writers, including Yosef Hayyim Brenner, Uri Nisan Gnessin, David Fogel, and even Agnon, extensively portrayed this intelligentsia. I intentionally cite these writers because they penetrated to the depths of the soul and precisely analyzed the complex attraction and repulsion, love and hate that permeated every contact the intelligentsia had with its cultural inheritance, and the more profound the analysis was the more it pointed to a gaping abyss between each sensitive, life-affirming individual and his dying cultural inheritance. And again, this form of assimilation was not capricious, it was not a momentary idea, a mere passing fad; it constituted a gaping abyss.

One increasingly gets the feeling that from the beginning of the twentieth century, and you could say even before that, the destruction was crouching at the door not only because of the threatening external conditions, but because the internal relationship of the individual to his cultural inheritance was being undermined. I am not referring to the explicit declarations that spoke of this in a confident manner, but rather to the literary testimony of Agnon, Brenner, Gnessin, and Fogel, and in point of fact almost every Hebrew writer, which revealed the bitter feeling that the destruction was inevitable.

We can state with certainty: Hebrew literature in general and Hebrew writers in particular foresaw the destruction, warned of it, and portrayed it in many different ways years before the Holocaust. You could say that once it became aware of it, all of Hebrew literature ceaselessly warned of the coming end. And as with every dissenting vision it did not lack irritating, account-reckoning, and insolent expressions. Even the Jewish intellectual who with all the fibers of his soul was tied to the Jewish collective and to its cultural inheritance, sometimes even more than those who consciously separated themselves, knew no mercy when he undertook to reveal the abyss and proclaim the arrival of the inevitable fate.

Writers like Agnon, Brenner, Gnessin, and Fogel, who could certainly not be suspected of superficial Zionism, repeatedly noted that in a hidden alchemic process the subtle, invisible ties of the Jewish intellectual to

the collective and its cultural inheritance had been damaged. Something in the kernel, or you could say in the underlying meaning of the kernel, was harmed. I am not speaking of those who took strong positions about the relationship of "Judaism and humanity" or about arriving at "a historical crossroad," who spoke in the language of ideology, but rather those who sought the underlying meaning of their identity. Certainly no one better than Agnon, Fogel, Gnessin, and Brenner, each one in his own style, whether in a more understanding or more directly critical way, noted that the kernel that had the potential to develop, that vital kernel, was damaged beyond repair.

You cannot say that Hebrew literature did not envision the Holocaust. On the contrary, the vision emerged early, earlier than one might have expected. But, one might ask, why was not only Brenner but even Agnon skeptical of the possibility of a Zionist national revival? This skepticism derived, in my opinion, from their lack of faith in the power of an external change to bring about healing, for the kernel, the hidden kernel, was sick. Furthermore, he who depended on the improvement of external conditions to bring about the remedy was not revealing the true weakness and was only deluding himself.

Not a few observers have noted the tension between the Zionist movement as an ideological expression and a practical program on the one hand and Hebrew literature on the other, even though both seem to have had a common origin. Zionism was impelled by the pursuit of its goals, but Hebrew literature, to the extent that it removed the outer layer and observed the individual Jew, revealed that the hidden kernel within him had been damaged. Thus, in point of fact, the basis for Agnon's ironic view of Zionism was in the gap between the depths of the national sickness and the methods put forth to heal it. Zionism in all of its practical, dedicated, and beautiful manifestations was in the final analysis only a well-meaning illusion. Hebrew literature envisioned this in a profound and clear manner. And what does this clarity tell us? Difficult external circumstances and self-destructive impulses went hand in hand as fateful forces that could no longer be separated.

This is a literature whose prophecies were fulfilled. And as is true of all fulfilled prophecies, despair, if not a curse, has plagued it. The bitter vision came about, but it came about to an extent that not even the fiercest prophets had imagined.

We try to understand the Holocaust using sociological, political, and sometimes theological terminology. But it seems to me that the depths of the tragedy were not limited to the confrontation between the victim and the murderer, but extended as well to the bitter fact that the majority of the Jewish intelligentsia no longer saw itself in covenant with the Jewish cultural inheritance. Satan himself, as in a metaphysical

drama, came down to force them unceremoniously to return to the Jewish collective.

I still remember the amazed faces of Jews of German and Austrian origin, mostly assimilated for generations, when they were exiled to the ghettos. There, to their amazement, they met ghetto Jews, Yiddish-speaking Jews, whom they had tried to ignore for years. The hand of Satan did what only the hand of Satan can do: it brought you to the place from where you wanted to flee. This confrontation with yourself, with all that only recently seemed to you to be anachronistic, passed its prime, outdated, and meaningless, this confrontation induced the beginning of a stock taking that to this day has not been completed.

It is difficult to say this, but it must be said. A hidden process of self-destruction accompanied by manifestations of self-hatred operated openly in the years before the Holocaust. This was true first and foremost among the Jewish intelligentsia. And even while you were on the way to fulfilling your enchanting vision, the hand of Satan returned you to a fundamental tribal existence and commanded you to experience it fully in all of its glories and humiliations, not as an individual, and not because it was in accordance with your worldview, but only because you were a member of the Jewish people.

The prophecies of Hebrew literature were fulfilled. When I refer to prophecy I do not mean social observations that were loudly proclaimed in public discussions. I refer rather to those hidden processes of the destruction of cells, of loathing and self-loathing, or you could say of a death wish. The Holocaust arrived when we were not only unprepared from a sociological point of view, but also surprised by the argument for Jewish existence that was no longer taken seriously by the Jewish intelligentsia.

One could say that it would appear that art fulfilled its obligation. It did not hide anything or beautify it; it expressed the most concealed fears; and if its prophecies were not heeded, at least it did what it was supposed to do. Nevertheless, this does not provide any relief. Take, for example, Agnon's great novel *A Guest for the Night*, a pre-Holocaust Holocaust novel, and compare it to the Holocaust memorial book for the community of Buczacz, in which it is recounted in detail how this community was actually destroyed. All arguments, including the religious ones, and of course expressions of rebuke, suddenly seem naïve. The volcano that erupted in the Holocaust dissociated life, and even more so artistic criteria, from any relationship to accepted norms. Even some of the eternal truth of a great work like *A Guest for the Night* was damaged.

The theological justification of sin and punishment is alien to me. No less alien to me is the Zionist justification that sees the rejection of the Land of Israel as the mother of all sin. To me, Hebrew literature was

accurate when it spoke of the pain of destroyed cells, of a fatal disease that spread through vulnerable bodies, of senses that were dulled, of the burden of past generations that was suddenly too heavy to bear, of a kind of yearning from the depths.

Art did not hide anything. It expressed the most concealed fears. All that it feared, to its great misfortune, came about. It is no wonder that mourning pervades all of its prophecies, a kind of eternal mourning that pervades a bereaved father for whom all that he feared and warned against came about, but even so he would never say, "I was right."



