What "Dances" in Agnon's "Dance of Death"

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"Meḥolat hamavet" ("Dance of Death," or "Danse Macabre"),[1] one of S. Y. Agnon's minor stories, is not very popular with readers in spite of the fact that its special dramatic, balladic qualities have been exposed lately through dramatization.[2] As Arnold Band correctly observes, "Meḥolat hamavet" combines the atmosphere of Yiddish and Hebrew folk tales on the one hand with the atmosphere of German Romanticism on the other, and its charm derives from the fact that it is directed simultaneously at both naïve and sophisticated readers.[3] In this essay I will attempt to reveal the charm as well as the complexity and sophistication of this story.

On a first reading, "Meḥolat hamavet" seems to be a sad, balladic story about the cruel destruction of matrimonial love, but as in every ballad, it has a mysterious dimension activating the plot that must be discovered by the reader. In order to decode this dimension, the reader must ask several questions, such as: Why did the implied author "murder" the couple? Why did he have the bridegroom die first, and later the bride, as opposed to having them die together? And the major issue: What brought about their tragic end?

[1] Published in 1919 in the collection *Polin: agaddot mini qedem* (Poland: Legends of the Far Past). In the second edition of Agnon's collected stories (1953) the title of the story was expanded to "Meḥolat hamavet o hane'ehavim, vehane'imim" ("Dance of Death, or The Beloved and the Pleasant"). Its basic plot existed already in Agnon's Hebrew story "Hapanas" ("The Lamp," 1907) and in his Yiddish story "Toytntants" ("Danse Macabre," 1911). "Hapanas" was not included in Agnon's collected stories. It was reprinted in *Molad* 21 (175–176) (1963): 64–65. "Toytntants" was reprinted in S. Y. Agnon, *Yiddishe verk* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 73–83.

[2] This dramatization was created by Yehudit Rizi and has been performed at the Agnon House in Jerusalem since July 1999. On December 22, 1999, I introduced a performance with a lecture that stimulated this essay.

[3] Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 100–102.

The alternative titles presented in the full name of the story, "Dance of Death, or The Beloved and the Pleasant," reflect the two cultural sources of the story, German Gothic and Jewish. The title "Dance of Death" reflects the German Gothic world that includes the tragic intensity of the *danse macabre.* "The Beloved and the Pleasant" alludes to David's lament on Saul and Jonathan's death in the war against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa—"Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant, never separated in life or in death" (2 Samuel 1:23)—thereby reflecting a Jewish image of the inability to separate lovers, as well as the defeat of Jews at the hands of their enemies. As the plot of the story unfolds, the wedding of a young Jewish couple is tragically transformed into a funeral when a gentile landowner murders the bridegroom and kidnaps the bride (358).[4] The wedding dance of the bridegroom and the bride is delayed until the end of the story after the bride dies, when it becomes a *danse macabre* that unifies the dead couple and proves their eternal love.[5]

The human tragedy of the young couple in "Meḥolat hamavet" is that the happiness of their wedding is destroyed by the violent power motivated by intense instincts imposed on them by the *parits,* the gentile feudal landowner. This tragedy is depicted very intensely by the effective use of elements drawn from nature that evoke a mytho-poetic effect. For example, toward the beginning of the story the narrator describes weeds as "red like blood" (356). Later he portrays the *parits* by means of a simile: "His shadow crouches like a heavy rock" (359), and he refers to events occurring after the bride's death "every night when the rooster cries at midnight for the second time and the stars have their exchange of guards in the firmaments" (359).

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[4] All references are to S. Y. Agnon, *Elu ve'elu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953). The translations are mine.

[5] The balladic motif of the *danse macabre* story appears quite frequently in European ballads, and Agnon probably derived this motif from German sources. As mentioned above, he made use of the image of the *danse macabre* in his earlier Yiddish story "Toytntants." The motif reappears in the *danse macabre* of Raphael the Scribe with his deceased wife Miryam, while they are covered with her wedding gown in "Aggadat hasofer" ("Legend of the Scribe," 1919). It is also transformed into metaphorical forms in a number of other stories in which Agnon deals with matches that have not been consummated because of various impediments, such as "Agunot" (1908), "Shevu'at emunim" ("Vow of Faith," 1943), and "Tehillah" (1950), as well as in stories about the resurrection of the dead from their graves as a result of a sin committed against them, such as "Hayaldah hametah" ("The Dead Girl," 1932) and "Halev veha'einaym" ("The Heart and the Eyes," 1943).

Agnon also evokes an unmistakable Jewish theme that he used in the stories "Hapanas" ("The Lamp") and "Halev veha'einayim" ("The Heart and the Eyes"),[6] as well as in the story "Sippur hana'arah hame'orasah" ("The Story of the Engaged Maid").[7] This theme is the tragedy of an innocent Jewish girl who is captured by a non-Jewish man, but nevertheless remains loyal to her religious and national identity.[8] The Jewish aspect of this theme is emphasized in the text by folkloristic and historical means. The location of the dramatic events is the old synagogue where the wedding takes place, the bridegroom is murdered and buried, and the bride is kidnapped. It is also the place where the *danse macabre* occurs night after night following the death of the bride. Moreover, the Jewish identity of this location is deepened by the presentation of a riddle that can be solved only by reference to traditional Jewish law (*halakhah*). At the beginning and the end of the story the narrator indicates that priests (*kohanim*) are not allowed to step into this place and that weddings are not permitted there. At first, the narrator wonders why this is so. Then he suggests that the answer may be found in the story he will tell. At the end of the story the narrator makes clear the solution to the riddle: since this is a place where blood has been shed, the dead have been buried, and the dance of the dead still takes place, it must be treated as a cemetery that, according to Jewish law, is forbidden to priests and inappropriate for celebrations.

The story also portrays Jewish wedding customs. The father chooses a bridegroom for his daughter in accordance with the traditional Jewish preference for a man "great in the knowledge of Torah and awe of God"

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[6] It is no coincidence that this story appears in *Elu ve'elu* next to "Meḥolat hamavet."

[7] It is unknown when this story was written, but it was published posthumously in S.Y. Agnon, *Ir umelo'ah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1973), 272–74. In the language and plot of this story there are numerous parallels to "Meḥolat hamavet," although the story does not end up with a dance of death. It seems that the two stories share the same historical background, which is the end of the eighteenth century, when the Polish feudal landowners could still mishandle Jews as much as they wanted.

[8] This theme appears in various configurations in works by other Hebrew writers. See, for instance, three ballads by S. Tschernikhovski, in which a Jewish girl is afraid of being kidnapped and/or raped by a gentile: "Bat harav" ("The Rabbi's Daughter," 1924), "Bat harav ve'immah" ("The Rabbi's Daughter and Her Mother," 1942), "Bito hayaffah shel harav" ("The Beautiful Daughter of the Rabbi," 1942), and his long poem "Barukh miMagentsa" ("Baruch from Mainz," 1901), in which the father kills his daughters in order to prevent them from bearing children to the enemies of the Jews. See also "Laḥash haqesem" ("The Magic Murmur," 1920), by Jacob Cahan.

(256). The wedding takes place on the fifteenth of the month, when the moon is full, in keeping with Jewish custom. The father follows the traditional Jewish practice of making a great feast for the poor and donating money to support the weddings of impoverished brides. Customs that recall the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem are observed: people shed tears for the destroyed Temple, the groom is dressed in a white robe, he puts ashes on the part of his head where he would wear phylacteries, and he breaks a glass (357). Other folkloristic customs are depicted as well. The men dance in front of the bride, and the women circle her three times, interlacing their feet and slapping twisted *ḥallot* as they dance. One woman says, "A bridegroom is like a king," and another says, "a nice and pious bride" (357–58).

Thus, the story of a Jewish wedding is implanted into a historic world in which taxes have to be paid to the king, presents have to be given to the queen in order to be married, a *parits* abuses Jews, and Jewish authorities forbid brides to wear silk dresses.[9] This historical frame shows that the tragic plot reflects not only the exertion of the instincts of a villain who kidnaps a bride under the canopy, but also the fate of the Jewish minority. This Jewish minority is dependent on the benevolence of their gentile neighbors. While the Jews obey the laws of the land, they are abused by the gentiles, who can do to them whatever they have in mind, for there is no rule of law preventing them from doing harm.

This Jewish destiny is portrayed also in symbolic and mythological ways. For example, the murder of the bridegroom and the fearful reaction of the people suggest the atmosphere of a pogrom, which is intensified by the use of the expression "awful terror" (*ḥerdat elohim*), and especially by use of the expression "the remnant of the survivors" (*she'erit hapeletah,* 358), which frequently refers to survivors of pogroms. The description of the acts performed by the *parits* alludes to biblical descriptions of destruction; for example: "His sword moves like a drunkard swinging around his loins" (cf. "The earth moves like a drunkard swinging back and forth like a hut," Isaiah 24:20); in describing the killing of the bridegroom, the narrator states, "from his throat his blood spills," which alludes to "their blood spills on my clothing" (Isaiah 63:3); the *parits* is depicted as a hunter returning from his hunting ground "his cloth red [or, sour] with blood"—alluding to, "Who comes from Edom in red clothing" (Isaiah 63:1)—thereby associating him with the ancient enemy of Israel, the Edomites, and their forefather Esau.

[9] The historical background of this prohibition executed by the Jewish authority is explicated in Arna Golan's essay, "'Meḥolat hamavet' by S. Y. Agnon," *Molad* 4 (23) (1972): 513–23.

Although Agnon exercises much freedom in his use of biblical references, it is significant that the main sources for these references are chapters 24 and 63 of Isaiah. These chapters describe the future revenge to be enacted on Israel's enemies, thereby reinforcing the idea of revenge on the foreign oppressor, which functions also as a main element in the plot. This desired revenge is expressed when it is told that the bridegroom was buried soiled by his blood in order "to arouse fury and revenge" (358). The emergence of the bride from her tomb is depicted not less than three times as an emergence from "the graves of a foreign godhead" (*miqivrot el nekhar,* 359). This final image of a surrealistic revenge gives the story the character of a Jewish revenge ballad.

The folkloristic, historic, and mythological Jewish dimensions that appear in all aspects of the text through its plot and language stress a different aspect than the balladic, Gothic dimension. According to these Jewish dimensions, the root of all evil is not masculine lust and desire but the viciousness of the gentile who inflicts harm on the Jew at will, robbing, tormenting, and killing him whenever he likes. Suitable revenge for the criminal acts of the gentiles cannot, of course, be realized in the lifetime of the characters, but only in the permanent demonic return of the captive bride to her Jewish identity and to her bridegroom to share with him a kind of post-mortem love life in their *danse macabre* night after night.

If we note the degree to which the bride and her father are portrayed with human weaknesses, we can discern that Agnon sought to defy conventional notions of absolute virtue colliding with absolute vice. Indeed, these portraits imply that the tragic plot was driven, in part, by the behavior of these two characters. The father is portrayed as displaying a moral flaw, which must be understood in the context of the historical dimension described above. When the father asks the leader of the Jewish community[10] to allow his daughter to wear a silk dress on her wedding day, the leader refuses to violate the rule made by Jewish community leaders that prohibited Jewish brides from wearing silk (356). The father is not pleased with this ruling, and he accepts it only half-heartedly. Although "he did not appeal the leader's verdict" (356), he had actually prepared his daughter's silk dress even before the response of the head of the community, and following the ruling, the father moves his hand in an unaccepting way, thereby indicating that he is a man who underestimates the importance of established rules. Moreover, the prohibition of

[10] According to historical information this leader represented the community in the Board of Four Countries (*va'ad arba aratsot*) and had to take care that the regulations of the governing bodies were fulfilled.

silk dresses does have a moral justification, for it is said that "they are prohibited in the holy community of Israel because they bring about destruction and desolation and a waste of their money" (356). In contrast, the father's request has no moral justification and is motivated by his wish to spoil his only daughter and probably by his impulse to show off before the community. Although the father does understand that "his daughter is also a nice and pious bride in a simple dress," and he even sells the silk dress and dedicates the money "for bridal canopies of poor girls" (357), nevertheless, he does not let go of his basic dissent from the community leader's ruling.

The bride's attitude also seems to be morally questionable. On the one hand, it is said several times that she is a "nice and pious bride," and she seems to relate to her father in an obedient manner. She neither opposes the choice of the bridegroom who suits the heart of her father,[11] nor does she refute her father's request for her to be permitted to wear a silk dress. On the other hand, however, the story indicates that there may be a hidden dimension to the relationship between the bride and the *parits*. This hidden dimension is suggested by the figurative language of the story in three phases. In the first phase, the appearance of the *parits* is observed collectively by the wedding guests: "They were under the canopy and a small cloud was rising from the end of the city. They raised their eyes and saw a horse and its rider" (357). Although the wedding guests think that the horse and its rider are positive signals, the expression "a horse and its rider," which alludes to a biblical reference to Pharaoh's army pursuing the Israelites (Exodus 15:1), suggests anxiety and danger.

In the second phase, the rider on his horse is the concern of the bride and not of the guests: "The bride lowered her two pure eyes to the ground. Who rides on a horse? Like the shadow of a heavy rock its shadow lies between her and the bridegroom" (358). The small real cloud rising from the end of the city is transformed in the consciousness of the bride into the simile "like the shadow of a heavy rock," an expression of a component in

[11] In the dramatic adaptation and performance of the story mentioned above, the director interpreted the repeated expression *kilvavo* ("suiting his heart") as an indication of the father's sin. According to this interpretation the father has chosen a bridegroom according to his own taste, thereby defying his daughter's resistance. The wedding in the play is forced on her, indicating that the father wanted to dominate his daughter's life. In my opinion, this interpretation overly exaggerates the father's sin. The expression *kilvavo* reflects the traditional social order in which parents used to select bridegrooms according to their taste and understanding but not necessarily against their daughters' wills.

the soul of the bride. The question "Who rides on a horse?" comes immediately after the statement: "The bride lowered her two pure eyes to the ground." From the juxtaposition of the statement and the question we can conclude that the sight of the rider as a "shadow of a heavy rock" is the reason why she is lowering her eyes. The statement "its shadow lies between her and the bridegroom" points out that the rider's shadow endangers the marriage of the bride and groom. On one level, it appears that the bride is terrified by the possibility that a stranger will hurt her innocence, which explains the lowering of her "pure eyes." On another level, it might appear that the bride is not afraid to lose her innocence by means of this stranger and that she is attracted and fascinated by him. Thus, the lowering of her eyes signals that she is not as pure as she seems to be.[12] Nevertheless, this interpretation is contradicted by the description of the forcible kidnapping of the bride: "the girl was shouting and she did not have any savior," an allusion to a biblical reference to rape (Deuteronomy 22:27).[13] Moreover, since the bride lowers her eyes immediately after being married, even before the rider is identified as somebody dangerous, we may assume that the heavy shadow between the bride and the bridegroom is a metaphoric reference to the anxiety she feels in anticipation of the consummation of her marriage.

In the third and last phase we find, "Who rides on the horse? As the shadow of a heavy rock lies down on her heart" (359). Here the heavy rock is disconnected from any external reality and seems to emerge solely from the bride's memory. The shadow is no longer between herself and the bridegroom but explicitly "on her heart." The bridegroom had been murdered many years before, and his bride lives in the house of the *parits* as his wife, but she is persecuted from the inside, in her heart, by the heavy shadow. While in the earlier stage the shadow separated her from her bridegroom, now it separates her from her life in the palace. The heavy shadow that lies on her heart causes her heart to be transformed. The expression "her heart has been transformed" (*nehpakh aleha libbah,* 359) is quite significant. Its basic literal meaning is that she had a heart attack or a stroke, but the metaphorical meaning is that she was transported back to her past, reunited with her bridegroom and her Jewish identity, and especially that she became connected with the world of the dead to which the bridegroom belongs. According to this interpretation, the shadow of the *parits* that brought about the first transformation of her life has become the shadow lying on her heart,

[12] See Nitza Ben Dov, *Ahavot lo me'usharot* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), 333–54.

[13] The same phrase is used by Agnon to indicate rape in "Sippur hana'arah hame'orasah."

not letting her stay with the *parits,* meaning that it dialectically has caused the second transformation of her heart—her death and her return to her bridegroom.

The analogy between the bride's death and burial in her wedding gown and the burial of the groom in his wedding clothes, as well as her leaving the gentile cemetery every night to visit the bridegroom's grave by the synagogue, accentuates metaphorically the unification of the bride with her bridegroom as "the beloved and pleasant" in their death, although it is a macabre realization of this unification. On the other hand, it accentuates the bride's return to her Jewish roots, which happens ironically only after she passes away. If we choose to maintain that she had committed the sin of falling in love with the *parits* and deserting her Jewish identity, this return to her roots could be understood as an act of atonement. On the overt level of the text, however, there is no need for her atonement, as it says that "she refused to leave the God of Israel and was strolling round the castle depressed and lonely under the pressure of her agony" (*qoderet shomemah belaḥats yegonah,* 359).

The bride's transformation can also be interpreted as an act of vengeance directed at the gentiles. The bride's inner transformation, her abandonment of her husband the *parits,* her wearing of her wedding dress, her being buried in it, and her nightly leaving of her tomb in the gentile cemetery to be united in a *danse macabre* with her murdered lawful Jewish husband constitute a metaphysical revenge that has a romantic, individual, and national meaning. This post-mortem reunion of these two young Jews is brought about in spite of persecution and murder. This revenge obviously does not cause much harm to the *parits.* It is less an act of reprisal and more a surrealistic poetic justification of the victim that takes place in the world of fantasy, or in the afterlife. Agnon omitted here the outcome of his earlier story "Hapanas," in which the grandson of the kidnapped bride returns to Judaism and becomes an important Jewish scholar. The omission of this epilogue in "Meḥolat hamavet" is an obvious sign of despair. It means that the vicious acts of the adversaries will never be revenged in the real life of the victims or their descendants. Even if the bride returns to her Jewish origins, the *parits* continues to live, and she with her bridegroom can become "the beloved and the pleasant" only in death. The revenge is thus transcendental, and the consolation seems to be quite macabre.

Who is to blame for this tragic state of affairs: the *parits,* the father, or the daughter? The guilt of the first is laid bare on the overt level of the story. The definitive proof of his guilt is the fact that he murdered the most innocent character in the story, the bridegroom. A number of critics have found insinuations of the guilt of the two others in the covert

level of the story.[14] This led them to impose on the story meanings derived from its intense allusionary power that do not have much evidence in the text itself. It is true that Agnon frequently uses all kinds of intertextual devices to create a covert text, but interpretations based on intertextuality in Agnon's texts can sometimes be quite far-fetched. Not every connotation is relevant, and very often the construction of a covert plot on the basis of these devices can be quite artificial. In order to discern the relevance of intertextual devices and not to ascribe too much significance to their function, it is important to check and recheck the connection of the covert intertext to the overt text. A major misunderstanding can be created especially when the reader projects a subjective perspective onto the reading. For example, a reading that finds in "Meḥolat hamavet" the opposition of Agnon to the deterioration of faith and moral strength of the Jewish characters would seem to be a far-fetched secular reading,[15] while an allegorical reading that sees the story as an anti-Diaspora and pro-Zionist allegory would seem to be an excessively Zionist interpretation.[16]

In considering the "sins" of the father and the daughter, it should be asked if those are the cause of the catastrophe. Furthermore, is the catastrophe supposed to be a punishment at all? And why was the *parits* the one to execute it? Even the father's guilt, which seems to be more obvious than his daughter's, is not definitive because although he is unsatisfied with the verdict on the silk dress, he does obey it. But even if the father sinned, Agnon does not make it easy to understand how that sin is connected to the catastrophe. On one hand, he does not describe the father's reaction to the calamity, and on the other hand, if it is a punishment for the father's feelings but not for his actions, it is disproportionately

[14] Golan claims that the father sinned heavily not only by his inner opposition to the prohibition of the silk dress, but also by arranging a sumptuous wedding meal, and that the bride sinned by her attraction to the *parits*. See Golan, "Meḥolat hamavet." Ben Dov also claims that the father and the daughter are both sinners. By referring to several biblical connotations she creates a brand new covert story, which is absolutely different from the overt one. In this story the daughter knew the *parits* before her wedding and died while giving birth to his child. See Ben Dov, *Ahavot lo me'usharot*. Roni Kohavi-Nehb claims that the father is guilty for his intensely felt inner opposition to the verdict on the silk dress, but she exempts the daughter. See Roni Kohavi-Nehb, "'Meḥolat hamavet o hane'ehavim vehane'imim' leS.Y. Agnon: hagaddah ufishrah," *Dappim lemeḥqar besifrut* 12 (2000).

[15] Ben Dov, *Ahavot lo me'usharot*, 334.

[16] Kohavi-Nehb, "Meḥolat hamavet," 253, 256, 261–62.

unjust. Moreover, it seems to be quite ironic that although the prohibition against brides wearing silk dresses was kept strictly in order to prevent destruction, its observance did not prevent the tragic destruction. It would seem, therefore, that Agnon is indicating that the calamity was not a punishment and that the cruel actions of the *parits* have nothing to do with the intentions or actions of the Jews.

As for the daughter's "guilt," it is only imaginable in an overly sophisticated intertextual interpretation. If she committed any sin, in her death she underwent a process of complete purification. Moreover, her death while remembering her past constitutes an indictment of the *parits*. In the final analysis, the guilt of the father and his daughter are not to be compared to the obvious guilt of the *parits*. They certainly do not deserve blame for the tragedy in the way the *parits* does. The hints of minor guilt in two of the victims would seem to be aspects of their characterization rather than elements of a moral judgment. Nevertheless, these hints of guilt are the means for Agnon to suggest that human characters are not perfect and that even innocent victims of a pogrom probably have some flaws that make them appear more human and vulnerable than they would if they were presented as shallow stereotypes. Such complex characterization is Agnon's way of transcending the simplicity of the core folkloristic legend of this story.

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