A REGRETTABLE GUEST

By HILLEL HALKIN

A GUEST FOR THE NIGHT, by S. Y. AGNON. Translated by Misha Louvish. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. 485 pp. $6.95.

FOR THE ENGLISH reader with an interest in Agnon—and presumably the number has grown since last year's Nobel Prize award—the publication of a translation of *Oreaḥ Natah la-Lun* is a long-awaited event. Considered to be Agnon's masterpiece by most Hebrew critics, *Oreaḥ*, which was originally serialized in the Hebrew press in 1938-39, has had to wait nearly thirty years to appear in an English version. The first of Agnon's three long novels, *Hakhnasat Kalah* (1931), was published several years ago as *The Bridal Canopy* and has since been reissued; thus, with *A Guest for the Night*, only Agnon's last major work, *T'mol Shilshom* ("Only Yesterday," 1945), is still unavailable in English.

Like much of Agnon's longer fiction, *Oreaḥ Natah la-Lun* has little in the way of a concerted plot. The setting is Galicia, in southern Poland, shortly after the First Word War. The narrator, who remains nameless throughout, returns to the town in which he was born and raised after having lived for many years in Palestine. Why has he come? The answer is not clear (only toward the end of the book do we learn that his house in Jerusalem has been razed by Arabs, but this is at most the formal cause of his trip): perhaps simply to revisit the scene of his childhood, perhaps, more ambitiously, to experience once again the simple self-contained wholeness of life in the *shtetl*, to whose values and traditions he has remained faithful in his fashion. In any case, he comes intending to stay for only a few nights and remains for nearly a year—from the eve of Yom Kippur, on which he arrives, through the end of the following summer.

The town as he remembers it has changed beyond recognition. Taken from the ruins of Austria-Hungary and made over to a reconstituted Poland by the Treaty of Versailles, it has also been torn from the past into the present, from the quiet *bürgerlichkeit* of Franz Josef's empire into the turmoil of post-war Europe. The Jewish community in particular is a shadow of its former self, its population decimated by the war, its economic life shattered, its shops and houses ransacked by pogroms. The old religious molds have cracked wide apart and a cold wind blows through the seams. Only the old are still found in the synagogues and even for them attendance is more an act of resigned habit than of living faith. As for the young, if they have not been killed or maimed in the fighting or gone off to America, they have become secular Zionists, or Communists, or converts to cynicism and despair. Seeking a lost idyll, the narrator finds himself in a grim *danse macabre* instead.

AND YET he stays on. Months pass. Little of consequence happens. As in much of Agnon's fiction, in a world of divine absense and unpurpose, the Kingdom of Accident reigns supreme. A sets out to visit B but encounters C instead, who introduces him to D, who begins a story about E which turns out to be really about F; A, however, confuses F with G, which necessitates another story to enlighten him. Meanwhile B happens by, but by now A has forgotten why he wished to see him; perhaps it was really H whom he had in mind instead?... Thus accident begets accident and digression follows digression until X, Y and Z have been introduced as well. To the extent that the novel has a formal framework at all, it turns about the key to the study house, the old Bet Midrash, which passes into the narrator's hands shortly after his arrival because no one else has any use for it. The more he feels that the town has failed him, the more he retreats into the Bet Midrash to meditate and study the texts of his youth: so, by an ironic twist, he who has come home in search of his past becomes the custodian of a collective Past

which nobody wants. Ultimately the key becomes a burden even to himself, for he feels that he cannot leave the town until he finds a successor for it. Ony when a Jewish boy is born in the town—the first male child to be born since the war—does a solution present itself: the key is given to the child on the occasion of his circumcision and the narrator departs for Jerusalem. Does the Past then have a future after all? Has the narrator's quest been successful? Or has he simply come to realize that he has been pursuing what no longer exists? Agnon leaves the reader to decide for himself.

Thematically, *Oreaḥ Natah la-Lun* reflects what has perhaps been the central preoccupation of the modern Hebrew novel: the confrontation with a Tradition that no longer seems viable and the struggle to reorient oneself both Jewishly and humanly in the face of its disintegration. Nowhere in Hebrew literature have the death throes of the *shtetl* and the world of values that it stood for been described with so delicate a pathos as in *Oreach.* (One of the valuable by-functions of the novel is the reminder that traditional *shtetl* culture was well on its way to disappearing long before the period of the Holocaust.) As an imaginative work, *Oreaḥ* has its limitations: the restricted scope of the narrator's own vision, the occasional pieties insufficiently tempered by irony (a medium at which Agnon can be an adept when he wishes), and perhaps most seriously, the episodic structure itself, with its deliberate deadends that time after time seal off every promising avenue of development. But if *Oreaḥ* is not a truly major novel with all the complexity of insight thereby implied, it is still a classic of a minor one, and perhaps the best yet written in Hebrew, a language which has an unbroken tradition of poetry but which cannot be said to have produced a prose narrative of note from the end of the Biblical period until modern times.

Agnon, as even many who are not familiar with him in the original are aware by now, is an exceedingly hard writer to translate. Yet the difficulty is not, as one might ordinarily expect in the case of a complex modern author, primarily lexical or syntactical. On the contrary, there is probably no contemporary Hebrew author of any importance whose vocabulary and sentence structure are as simple as Agnon's, a fact often pointed out by critics when discussing the arch-conservatism of his style.

It has been said of Agnon that he writes in the Hebrew of the Mishnah and the Midrash, those vast legal and exegetical commentaries on the Bible, composed largely during the first centuries C.E., in which post-Biblical Hebrew prosody reached its full flowering and maturation. But this is at best a half-truth. What Agnon has done is to take the underlying forms of Mishnaic Hebrew and use them as a base, freely improvising on them and adding to them from later strata of Hebrew, including those of the present day, in order to meet his own needs. The result is something like an imaginary language of his own—a construct that is neither the Hebrew of the Mishnah nor the Hebrew of today, but rather a kind of model projection of what the latter might have been like had it developed organically out of the former and not been syntactically and idiomatically overrun by the languages of modern Europe in the course of being revived as a spoken tongue. The need to create such a language, needless to say, is in itself a profound reflection of Agnon's dissatisfaction with the direction that modern Hebrew, and by implication the entire Zionist venture, have taken.

Thus, the real problem in translating Agnon is what one might call "cross-cultural": because his language is so deeply rooted in a past which belongs to a religious tradition completely different from that amid which English developed, the task of finding the proper English equivalents for it is often well-nigh impossible. A simple example may help to illustrate this. On Yom Kippur morning, the day after his arrival in his native town, the narrator of *Oreaḥ Natah la-Lun* sets out for the synagogue and relates: "I took my time walking and told myself, there's no need to hurry, people have probably not risen early so as not to get sleepy while praying. When I arrived in the synagogue I saw that they were taking the Torah scrolls out of the Ark to read." It would seem at first glance

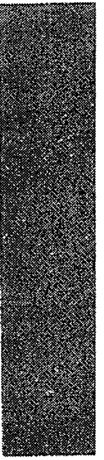
that nothing could be simpler—yet woven into these two Hebrew sentences is a cluster of nuances the existence of which the unsuspecting English reader cannot possibly divine on his own. Thus, for example, the phrase "people have probably not risen early" (*vadai lo hishkim ha'am*) is an unmistakable Biblicism with an austere suggestion of religious duty, as in the verse in *Judges* 21, "And in the morning the people rose early [*va-yashkem ha'am*] and built there an altar"; the fact that the Torah scrolls have already been taken out is a clear indication that the service has progressed more quickly than the narrator had expected; when the narrator states that "they were taking out" (*motsi'in*) the scrolls "to read" (*likrot*), he employs two Mishnaic verb forms which give his remarks a distinctly old-fashioned ring; while the word for "Ark" is not the usual Hebrew term *aron*, but rather *hechal*, literally "palace," a noun used frequently in the Bible and Mishnah to refer to the Temple in Jerusalem, whose metaphorical extension to mean "Ark" is a concise comment on exilic Jewish history. Of course, confronted with the dilemma of rendering such a passage, the translator is not totally without resources. By adding two words to the second sentence to make it read "*But* when I arrived . . . I saw they were *already* taking out the Torah scrolls," he can clearly convey that the narrator is late, for instance, even to the reader unfamiliar with the order of the Jewish liturgy. But even ingenuity has its limits. It would be clearly stretching things past the point of parody, for example, to try to duplicate the Mishnaic archaism of the narrator's remarks by translating them, "I saw they had taken out the scrolls to rede." Chaucer is not the Mishnah. Obviously, one cannot hope to reproduce the special quality of Agnon's "imaginary" Hebrew by inventing an equally imaginary English to convey it.

TRANSLATING AGNON, then, is anything but easy. At best it is a question of minimizing one's losses while producing a readable, credible English that is flexible enough to follow the shifting tones and rhythms of the Hebrew text. It is no disgrace to be less than wholly successful. But there is not, there cannot be any excuse for the insufferably bad translation of *Oreaḥ Natah la-Lun* that has now been issued as *A Guest for the Night*.

What is wrong with it? Practically everything. To begin with, the title itself, which comes from Jeremiah 14:8. The King James renders this verse: "Why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, *and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night*" (*u'kh'oreaḥ natah la-lun*). Admittedly, this isn't quite suitable for a book jacket—thirteen English words to render three in Hebrew—but it does convey something of the flavor of the original, with its haunting suggestion of long wandering, falling shadows, the coming on of night. By contrast, one could hardly if one tried come up with anything flatter and less evocative than *A Guest for the Night*. Surely it would have been possible to do better.

But let us go on. Chapter One. Arriving by train, the narrator hears his native town of "Szibucz" called out by a Polish dispatcher with one good arm and one made of rubber named—"Rubberovitch." (The name of the narrator's town is misspelled dozens of times in the course of the novel: if one is going to transliterate the Hebrew *Shibush* (a word which in itself has the meaning of "fault" or "corruption") into Polish orthography, the correct spelling is "Szibusz" not "Szibucz." As for the dispatcher, the androgynous absurdity of "Rubberovitch" is compounded by the fact that his name in the original, "Gumiwicz," conveys the pun on rubber perfectly adequately to the English reader as is). Walking into town, he sees a group of men and stops to ask where he might find an inn. One of them, a certain Daniel Bach, offers to show him the way. There follows a passage so badly translated and yet so typical of the translation as a whole that it bears reprinting in full:

> Daniel Bach was tall and lean, his head small, his hair chestnut, and his beard short, not pointed, not blunt; a kind of smile hung on his lips, spreading into his sunken cheeks; and his right leg was wooden. I walked along keeping pace, so as not to distress him by too long steps. Daniel Bach noticed this. 'If you are worrying about me,



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sir,' he said, 'you needn't, because I walk like any other man. In fact, this man-made leg is better than the other, which is the work of God. It doesn't have to worry about rheumatism, and beats the other for walking.' 'Does it come from the war?' I asked. 'Oh no,' said he, 'but the rheumatism in the other I got from the war.' Then I said, 'If that's the case, then permit me to ask, sir, were you injured in the pogroms?' He smiled and replied: 'From the pogroms I came out sound in body. And the hooligans should thank their stars they got out of my hands alive. So where did I get this leg? From the same source as all the other troubles; from things Jews have to do for a living. Hatach, "the cutter," the angel in charge of livelihoods, did not find me right with two legs, so he cut one off and made me stand on the other. How did it happen? But you have reached your hotel and I my house, and you have to hurry for the final meal. I wish you a full atonement.' I took his hand and said to him: 'The same to you, sir.' Bach smiled and said: 'If you mean me, it's a wasted greeting, for I don't think the Day of Atonement has any power to make things better or make them worse.' Said I, 'If it does not atone for those that do not repent, it atones for those that do.' 'I'm a sceptic,' he replied, 'I don't believe in the power of repentance.' 'Repentance and the Day of Atonement atone for half,' said I, 'and the troubles of the rest of the year for the other half.' 'I've already told you I'm a sceptic,' retorted Daniel Bach, 'and I don't believe the Almighty cares about the welfare of His creatures. But why should I be clever with you at dusk on the eve of the Holy Day? I wish you a full atonement.'

IN TRANSLATION as elsewhere, of course, one must allow for legitimate differences of taste. Having made such allowances, however, there are at least half-a-dozen renditions in the above passage which would seem absolutely unacceptable by any standard:

1) "I walked along keeping pace . . ." fails to do justice to the quite graphic Hebrew idiom *halakhti ekev b'tsad agudal,* literally "I walked heel by toe," i.e., "I dragged my heels," "I walked at a snail's pace."

2) There is absolutely no justification in English for having Daniel Bach and the narrator address each other as "sir." In Agnon's Hebrew the two men address each other in

the third person; although Hebrew, like modern English, does not have a special polite form, there is a tradition in Hebrew letters of employing the third-person singular to imitate the polite form in Yiddish, German, etc. Speakers of English, of course, have their own ways of expressing attitudes of politeness, but "sir" in this context suggests either an element of mutual servility or of mock-18th-century heartiness, neither of which are at all present in the original. The net effect is to falsify the tone of the entire passage, the half-serious, half-bantering conversation of two Galician Jews.

3) There is no reason for the inversion of normal English word order in such phrases as " 'Oh no,' said he," "Said I . . .", etc. Even if Agnon's Hebrew were archaic at this point—which it happens not to be—nothing could be gained through the use of an English archaism which invokes totally different associations.

4) "From the pogroms I came out sound in body" is a literal and totally unidiomatic rendering of a perfectly natural-sounding phrase in the Hebrew *(min ha-pra'ot yatsati shalem be-gufi)*. The normal conversational thing to say in English would be something like "I came through the pogroms without a scratch," "I wasn't hurt in the pogroms at all."

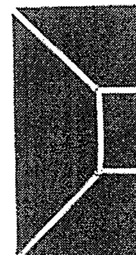
5) "Hatach . . . did not find me right with two legs" is another awkward literalism. In ordinary English one "likes" or "approves" of someone, one does not "find him right" or "not right."

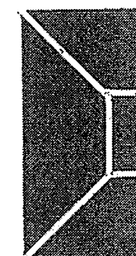
6) " 'I'm a sceptic,' he replied." Daniel Bach's Hebrew—*ani adam kal*—does not mean "I'm a sceptic" at all, but rather, "I'm a frivolous fellow," "I'm not a serious man." The two are quite different.

Lastly, one must call attention to the paragraphing—or rather, to the lack of it. Unlike modern Hebrew, but like such classical texts as the Mishnah, Agnon does not indent his dialogue (he does not trouble to put it in quotation marks, either). It is difficult to discern the advantage of imitating this practice in English, unless it be the dubious one of saving paper. Visually, it is an eyesore and a confusion.

UNFORTUNATELY the passage I have quoted sets the standard for the translation as a whole. There is hardly a page in *A Guest for the Night* that is not hopelessly scarred by English that is either stilted or misleading or both and by the most outrageous literalisms. The simplest Hebrew sentences come out sounding as though they had been pieced together word by word from a pocket dictionary. A shopkeeper who conversationally asks the narrator "Do you think things in Palestine will ever get better?" is made to say: "What do you think, sir, is there any remedy for the Land of Israel?" (The use of the word "sir" in *A Guest for the Night* reaches the most ludicrous proportions: at one point a housewife actually addresses a physician as "sir doctor"!) In the Hebrew a soldier gets killed in an earthslide; in the English we read that he has been "buried under a collapsing hill." A Mishnaic idiom referring to the end of the Biblical age of prophecy and hence to loss of contact with the divine in general—*nistam ḥazon*—is rendered literally as "the vision was blocked" and left at that. A young wife rebuking her husband for a *double entendre* is made to tell him "Don't give us these peculiar orations," when all she is actually saying, in Agnonesque Hebrew to be sure, is something like "Don't be crass!" *(Al tidrosh d'rashot shel dofi)*. A man who writes a woman "greetings and love notes" *(ig'rot shalom ve-ahavah)* in Hebrew, sends her "letters of love and salutation" in English. In the text, the narrator sees a boy in a nightmare "missing both hands" *(gidem bi'shtey yadav)*; in English we read that he is "docked of both his hands." The remark of a simple citizen "How lucky we are to live under a good government" is rendered as the florid "How happy we are to live under the shelter of a benevolent state," etc., etc.

Nor are we spared out-and-out mistranslations. Eyes "twitch" instead of blinking *(merofefot)*, lips that pucker *(nishtarbevu)* are said to "twist." In the Hebrew a girl flirts with an older man by jokingly asking him, "How many hairs [*nimin*] do you have on your Adam's apple?" In the English she inquires: "How many sinews [!] are there in your Adam's apple?" Mead *(mei-d'vash)* turns into "ale," canes into ordinary "sticks." A statement in the original to the





Here's what the

effect that the weather had become mild is translated as "the air was tepid." At one point the narrator remarks about his watch that "sometimes it keeps good time and sometimes bad" *(itim hu ḥalim ve'itim hu shoteh)*. In English this is rendered as "sometimes it is normal and sometimes out of its mind"! One could go on.

Add to this various other annoyances such as confusions of tense (Agnon, as is the common practice in Hebrew, frequently slips into a narrative present while speaking about the past; there is rarely justification for translating such passages in the present tense in English, as is done throughout *A Guest for the Night)*, inconsistencies in transliteration (why, for instance, do the Jews of Szibusz pronounce the Hebrew word for money *mu'es,* in the Ashkenazic fashion, but say *Bet Midrash* in the Sephardic?), the lack of a sensible policy in translating technical Hebrew terms (the words *mikveh, tallit* and *tefillin,* for example, all appear transliterated in the English text when one could just as well have said "ritual bath," "prayer shawl" and "phylacteries," whereas the Zionist anthem *Hatikvah,* which is known throughout the world by its Hebrew name, is rendered as "Our hope has not been lost"), and omissions in the glossary ("Passover" is included, "cheder" is not), and one begins to get an idea of the quality of Mr. Louvish's translation.

BUT IS IT REALLY Mr. Louvish's? Alas, we are likely never to know. True, he is credited with the translation on the title page, but on the page following we read "Edited by Naftali C. Brandwein and Allen Mandelbaum," while in a publisher's note at the end of the volume the name of Oscar Shaftel is mentioned as well. Presumably, then, we are dealing with some kind of Translation by Committee. In itself, of course, there is nothing wrong with the method, which has worked quite successfully in the case of several well-known Bibles. Yet we are told that these had the benefit of divine inspiration, something that can hardly be said of *A Guest for the Night.*

Seriously speaking, however, it is difficult to understand how a responsible publisher like Schocken, which has a long history of dealing with translations from the Hebrew, can permit itself to release such a scandalously poor version of Agnon's major novel. (What makes this ironical in the extreme is the fact that the founder of the house, Solomon Schocken, was among the first to publish Agnon in Hebrew and supported him financially for many years while he wrote.) *Oreaḥ Natah la-Lun* should by all rights have appeared in English long ago, but it would have been far better for it not to have appeared at all than to have appeared in so garbled an edition as the present one. One can imagine the disappointment of readers previously unfamiliar with Agnon after laboriously working their way through the pages of *A Guest for the Night. This* is the winner of the 1967 Nobel Prize for Literature? *This* is the man said to be the greatest living Hebrew author? One could hardly blame them for concluding that they have been the victims of a deliberate hoax.

But the damage has been done and one can only hope that it will not be repeated. The great bulk of Agnon's work—stories, novellas, and the long novel *T'mol Shilshom*—has still to be translated; one would like to think that after the example of *A Guest for the Night,* Agnon will be put in more competent hands in the future. Indeed, in an age when three of four different translations of any number of world classics, several of them often quite good, vie with each other on the shelves of the bookstores, is it perhaps too much to expect that we might soon see a second rendition of a minor classic like *Oreaḥ?* The outlook, it must be said, is not promising. The copyright on Agnon belongs to Schocken and *Oreaḥ* does not pass into the public domain until 1993. Must the English public really wait until then to enjoy Agnon's finest work in a readable translation?