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# FOREVERMORE



S. Y. AGNON



## INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM of the artist, which had concerned Agnon as early as "Agunot," particularly preoccupied him in his major period of experimental symbolism during the late 40s and 50s. This was the time when he was at work on *Shira*, his last, long novel (an incomplete version was published posthumously), which focuses on the relationship between art and sexuality, and on the claims of art as a unique source of truth. "Forevermore" shares these thematic concerns, approaching them through more obliquely symbolic distortion than does the novel; and like *Shira*, the story explores the connection between art and disease, or wisdom and disease (lepers figure centrally in both the novel and the story). "Forevermore" should also be read against the background of the novella, *Edo and Enam* (1952; English translation in Agnon's *Two Tales*, Schocken, 1966). *Edo and Enam* is still another story of a scholar delving into an archaic civilization, and it is the one other fiction of Agnon's that adopts the curious device of beginning virtually all proper names within the tale with the consonants *gimmel* or *ayin*.

That device, it should be said, is much more prominent in the Hebrew than it can be in any translation. The *ayin*, to begin with, is not visible as an initial consonant in transliteration. Then Agnon compounds the effect of the alliterative names—frequently in the

story, occasionally in the novella—with fantastic set pieces of inventive wordplay in which long strings of nouns and verbs are made to begin with the letters gimmel and ayin. In the version of the translation revised for this volume, some intimation of this bizarre technique is provided at several points. Now, the ayin and the gimmel are clearly some sort of signature, since they are the first two consonants of the author's own last name. Perhaps we are invited to infer that all the imagined acts and personages of the story are to be taken as the special private property of S. Y. Agnon, an intimate expression of his inner world as an artist and as a Jew that has to be conveyed in fantastic camouflage because of its very intimacy.

Other, more cryptographic implications of the two key letters may suggest themselves: gimmel ayin is a standard abbreviation for gan eden, Garden of Eden, and of course this is a paradoxical account of a paradise regained—in a leper hospital; in the opposite order, ayin gimmel constitute the Hebrew verb that means "to circle," and the story gives us a world of characters and seemingly opposed spheres that in fact are all held within the same magic circle, opposites linked in unsettling ways.

In any case, the most general effect of the repeated use of these two initial consonants is to endow everything in the story with a prominent quality of grotesqueness and through that to challenge our conventional vision of men, history, truth, fulfillment. "Forevermore" might be described as an anti-allegory. That is, it entices the reader into reading it allegorically, but then confronts him with such ambiguities, contradictions—and plain bizarreness—that the comfortable neatness of allegorical significance is denied him. Thus, the name Adiel Amzeh means "God's-Ornament This-People": the lepers recall a midrashic image of the degraded condition of the Jewish people in exile, and the tear-stained book that recounts the glory and destruction of an ancient people invites comparison with the Bible. Following this simple line, one would conclude that "Forevermore" is an allegory of the single-minded devotion to the Torah of the afflicted Jewish people, a people prepared to renounce worldly glory and wealth (Gebhard Goldenthal, whose very name is redolent of lucre) and to sequester itself in order to pursue the one dependable source of truth in this world. If such an allegory is intended, it is couched in such a way that it expresses the profoundest feelings of ambivalence toward the act of commitment described, for the treasured book is a hideous thing, covered with the suppura-

tions of the running sores of untold leprous readers: Eden is a place of disease, and the price Adiel Amzeh pays for his precious source of wisdom is, after all, a terrible one.

What the enigmatic details of the book of the city of Gumlidata do is to scramble such schemata of meaning and thus to suggest that the reality conveyed in the work of the true writer—the Hebrew sofer which is given considerable resonance in the story means both "scribe" and "author"—defies our ordinary categories of explanation and moral classification. A clue to Agnon's procedure here is provided by a biblical verse from which terms are borrowed, and insisted upon, at several key junctures in the story. In Deuteronomy 23:18-19, the Israelites are enjoined as follows: "There shall be no temple prostitute from the daughters of Israel, and no male temple prostitute from the sons of Israel. You shall not bring a harlot's pay nor a dog's price to the house of the Lord your God in payment of any vow, for they are both an abomination to the Lord your God." Temple prostitutes of both sexes, harlot's pay, dogs and their prices, figure prominently in Adiel Amzeh's studies of Gumlidata at the outset of the tale; he even sometimes has imaginary conversations with the dogs of the city about their price; and at the end of the story, he is telling his fellow inmates at the leper hospital about the official and familiar names, all of course beginning with gimmel, assigned to the temple prostitutes of both sexes and to the temple dogs.

If we were inclined to see some symbolic correspondence between the Book of Gumlidata and the Torah, these details instead indicate how Gumlidata is par excellence the sphere of paganism, with the vividness of its exotic culture, the secret of its abiding appeal for the scholar-hero, consisting precisely in acts and institutions defined by the Bible as abominations to the Lord. The intimations of ritualized and secular sexual promiscuity and of homosexuality, the bizarre commingling of the animal and human realms, put Gumlidata (the name suggests "Retribution Cult," "Reward Cult," or even "Weaning Cult") at the opposite pole from the world of firm prohibitions and clearly demarcated spheres that the Bible tried to legislate.

The story celebrates the power of the true writer, "who does not abandon his work even when the sword of death hangs over his neck, who writes with his very blood, in his soul's own script, what his eyes have seen." What the writer's eyes have seen, however,

is by no stretch of the imagination edifying, though it may be stirring, frightening, perplexing, arresting. What we can make out of it in the story is a panorama of sexual crisscrossings, weird animality, treachery, armed mayhem. Adiel Amzeh, at the end, has found the truth and renounced the world for it—but is it an aesthetic truth, or a purely antiquarian historical truth, with no reference to any set of values, and if so, where does that leave him?

There is surely nobility in Amzeh's final act of commitment, but what he is committed to remains ultimately ambiguous. The female figure of Wisdom, drawn from both Proverbs and Greek mythology, who whispers so sweetly to the scholar in the story's conclusion might even be whispering seductively, enslaving the discoverer of truth to his own ruin: that final turn of the screw would be entirely in keeping with the multiple ironic perspective Agnon has devised for this haunting fiction.