Wherefrom did Gediton Enter Gumlidata?—Realism and Comic Subversiveness in 'Forevermore'*

Esther Fuchs

1. Introduction

S. Y. Agnon's story "Ad Olam" (Forevermore) has stirred much critical controversy over its ideological meaning. Meshulam Tochner sees the story as a polemic against modern Biblical criticism and modern Hebrew literature.[1] Eddy Zemach claims that the story argues against secular Judaism.[2] Hillel Barzel maintains that the story demonstrates the transience of secular political statehood by displaying the way in which "one secular civilization is destroyed by another."[3] Despite the considerable differences between these interpretations they all agree that the story is a vehicle for an ideological message, and that the "overt text" is of secondary importance. The allegorical method of interpretation underlying these analyses focuses on the intention of the author and the meaning of the story but ignores the *form* of the story, e.g., the way in which the hero is characterized and the structure of the plot.

Since in narrative fiction, or for that matter, in any work of art form and content are inseparable, the ideological-allegorical approach misses not only the aesthetic impact of the form, but the meaning generated by it. The critic who concentrates on the ideological implications of the story to the exclusion of its other elements runs the risk of imposing his own preconceived ideas on the work. Criticizing Tochner's approach to Agnon, Dan Miron gives expression to this problem by asking, "Did the research precede the conclusion, or was it the conclusion which determined the research?"[4] In the case of ironic works, such as "Ad Olam," neglect of the formal aspect incurs far-reaching repercussions because it prevents the critic from noticing the incongruity between, for example, the point of view of the protagonist and that of the implied author. Most of the interpretations mentioned above indeed identify these distinct points of view; hence the interpretations ascribing to Agnon anti-Zionist or anti-secular conceptions. Furthermore, because of the obsessive concern with ideology, the ironic treatment of the protagonist and his field of research—the central metonymy of the story—was all but missed. It is ironic indeed that a story dedicated to questioning meaning and undermining the validity of academic research and logic in general should be presented as a rational-ideological allegory. By focusing on the two largely neglected aspects of characterization and the structure of the central metonymy, the present analysis will demonstrate the underlying irony of the story, which is its most salient feature.

---

*This article is a revised and expanded version of my paper, "Ad Olam: Pathos or Irony," delivered at the Eighth International Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1981.

MODERN LANGUAGE STUDIES 15:4 (AUTUMN 1985)

2. *The Characterization of the Protagonist*

Adiel Amzeh, the protagonist of the story, enjoys a considerable popularity among critics. He is presented as a tragic hero who reaches the highest human destination: liberation from material constraints and a true dedication to the spiritual and moral goals of life.[5] The mythical stature of the hero endows the story with high points not found in Agnon's other stories, which fail to offer an equal "epic, mythic and archaic development" of their heroes.[6] Adiel Amzeh is praised not only for his moral stature but for his scholarly achievements as well, in stark contrast to Agnon's other scholars and scientists.[7] Furthermore, Amzeh is presented both as the author's alter ego—his direct mouthpiece—and as the symbolic embodiment of the Jewish people.[8]

The enthusiastic reception of Adiel Amzeh considers his actions *in vacuo*. It disregards the context and motivations of his praiseworthy behavior. A man who joins a leprosarium elicits immediate admiration because one supposes that only a humane motivation can inspire him to do so. But this is not Amzeh's reason for joining the suffering lepers. The unanimous critical applause also ignores the *manner* in which Amzeh performs his supposedly humane actions, as well as the way in which the author characterizes him.

Despite his central role in the story, Amzeh is characterized as a type rather than a full-fledged character. The expositional material gives little information about his past or about any activities that are not directly related to his research. Amzeh exemplifies the type of the monomaniac, obsessed by his work and completely controlled by it:

> The years during which he worked on his research made him a slave to his work, controlling him from the early hours of the day till bedtime. Everyday, immediately on waking up, his legs dragged him to his desk, and pen and papers, and his eyes, if not absorbed in mental pictures and visions would fix themselves in the books or photographs or maps of Gumlidata or in the maps of the battles which destroyed Gumlidata.[9]

The syntactic structure of this excerpt emphasizes the idea that Amzeh is a slave to his work by presenting him as a direct object in both complex sentences (made him, controlled him, dragged him). His actions are described synecdochically: his legs, his eyes act for him. The synecdochic description emphasizes the physical, rather than volitional aspect of his actions, so much so that the protagonist seems more like a mechanical automaton than a human being. The mechanization of the human produces a comic effect, as explained by Bergson:

> The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are risible to the extent that this body makes us think of a simple mechanism . . . We laugh whenever a person gives us the impression that he is a thing . . . we laugh at any arrangement of acts and events which gives us . . . the illusion of life and the clear sensation of a mechanical agency.[10]

Although Amzeh deals with an activity that requires intellectual concentration and emotional involvement he is presented as a mechanical object activated by the very thing he is expected to control—his work. The author could have created empathy for the protagonist had he explained Amzeh's attachment to the history of Gumlidata, psychologi-

cally and/or intellectually. But he does not do so. Amzeh's obsession with Gumlidata continues to be just that: an arbitrary involvement with an outlandish topic. The description of Amzeh's writing and erasing, adding and subtracting adds to this impression of arbitrariness:

> At times he would add to *what he wrote* on the previous day, and *at times* he erased in one day *what he wrote* in many days. Similarly at night, often after going to bed, he would get up and return to the desk and check what he wrote, *sometimes with* a nod and *sometimes with* satisfaction and *sometimes* laughing at himself and his mistakes which caused him to investigate further and re-examine and correct.[11]

The repetitions in this excerpt reinforce the repetitive actions of writing and erasing, rewriting and rechecking. This presents Amzeh's actions as circular and reversible, just like his going to bed and getting up. By omitting specific references to what is written and erased the author succeeds in presenting Amzeh's actions as vacuous motions, nothing more than insipid and mechanical gestures. Repetitiveness, reversibility, and circularity are rudimentary ingredients in all comic actions.

The compulsive behavior of the protagonist could have turned him into a tragic hero had he been aware of his absurd situation. Amzeh is capable of laughing at his silly mistakes, but he is incapable of perceiving the overall inanity of his life. The causal link between action and consciousness can turn a clown into a victim, as Unamuno says.[12] Amzeh remains a clown because he is unconscious of his ridiculous conduct. In one of the climactic points of the plot, when Amzeh finds out that the wealthy Gerhard Goldenthal is interested in publishing his book on Gumlidata, the protagonist's conduct changes abruptly: "Suddenly he changed entirely and became like those famous scholars, who neglect their research work for the sake of the honor that people who do not deal with research give them."[13] The radical change in Amzeh's attitude is comic because it is abrupt and arbitrary; it signifies the opposite of all the values associated with him previously. The sudden reversal contributes to the characterization of Amzeh as an automaton. The mechanical and obsessive manner in which he previously worked now typifies his anxious anticipation of his visit with Mr. Godenthal: "And so he sat and glanced at his book and looked at the mirror, and glanced at the watch and checked his clothes and examined his movements, for he who seeks the presence of a rich man must take pains to look graceful in his clothes, and graceful in his face and graceful with his movements."[14] Amzeh's new obsession with his appearance highlights the arbitrary quality of his previous obsession with his work. The series of synonymous verbs—look, glance, check, examine—intimates that Amzeh's activities are inherently static and bring about little progress. Despite the new direction of his obsession, the manner in which he acts does not change. It remains compulsive, mechanical, unconscious. This reversal foreshadows the arrival of Ada Eden, the old nurse from the leprosarium. When the nurse first appears, inconveniently right before the scheduled appointment with Mr. Goldenthal, Amzeh apologizes for not being able to pay attention to her. But when he hears of the book "which has become rotten with age and tears"[15] he

changes his mind. He offers her a seat and implores her to continue talking about the extraordinary book at the leprosarium, and when it finally becomes clear that the ancient book is indeed related to Gumlidata, he decides to join the nurse on her way back to the leprosarium. *It is clear that Amzeh acts out of academic curiosity, not out of altruistic compassion for the poor, segregated, and ailing people.* We are confronted with an insatiable desire to accumulate information, which is vastly different from a Kierkegaardian leap into transcendence, as some critics believe it to be. Amzeh's questions revolve around the book, not the lepers: "What did you hear of that manuscript? How did it end up with you? You made me curious, madame, curious hungry for knowledge, practically like a psychoanalyst."[16]

Amzeh's attitude does not change even after his arrival at the leprosarium. His interaction with the lepers is not motivated by his will to alleviate their suffering but by his excitement over the things he finds in the book. The book is the aim, the lepers function at best as an audience with whom to share his discoveries: "And when he discovered something appropriate for everybody he entered the hall and gathered its residents and said to them brothers and friends sit down and I shall read for you."[17]

The only time Amzeh cries is not at all related to the anguish of the lepers, but to the heroic act of the city scribe who, despite the danger to his life, continued to write the history of Gumlidata even during the final attack on the city.[18] The protagonist joins the leprosarium for purely egotistical reasons; he does it in order to find out more information about Gumlidata, the ancient city he has been investigating for twenty years.

Still, the author could have diminished the ironic distance between Amzeh and the reader by describing the subjective perspective of the protagonist. Even the most irrational actions can be justified if their cause is understandable. It is evident, however, that the author does not wish to justify his monomaniac protagonist. The descriptions of Amzeh's excitement over the ancient manuscript focus on his facial features, not on his feelings. This is his reaction to Ada Eden's news: "Suddenly his face changed and his voice changed and his mouth became distorted and he burst into a stuttering laughter."[19] When he sees the ancient book in the leprosarium: "He stared at it till his eyes grew as big as half of his face and he did not stop staring at it till he jumped to open it."[20] When the lepers warn him not to touch the book with his bare hands and tell him about the dangers of contagion, the author adds sardonically; "I do not know whether he heard or did not hear. I know this: that his eyes grew till they stretched over his face and a part around his face."[21] The description of Amzeh's physiognomical expressions deploys the technique of caricature which exaggerates a certain facial feature beyond recognition and distorts normal proportion. Amzeh's exaggerated response to the book contrasts with his indifference to the lepers, whose sufferings ought to have elicited at least some reaction in the visitor. The caricatural description reflects the preposterous incongruity between reality and Amzeh's reaction.

The parody of Amzeh's speech increases further the ironic distance between him and the reader. Through repetition, digression, and cumbersome syntax the author manages to undercut Amzeh's run-on speech:

> I will tell you approximately about the matter; for twenty years I have dealt with the research of the history of that city; there is no piece of paper which mentions the city's name which I have not read, *if* I were a king I could reconstruct the city and rebuild it just as it was before its destruction, *and if* you want I will tell you about all the trips I take through it—I walk *in its* markets *and its* busy alleys, *and its* streets *and its* roads *and its* palaces *and its* temples. Oh, my good nurse the headache—from the trips I take there, and *I also know the order of its destruction, and I know how they destroyed it, and also* the name of every troop which worked on its destruction, *and how* many were killed by sword *and how many* died of hunger *and* thirst, *and how many* perished in the plague which followed the war, except for one thing that I do not know, from which *side* entered the troops of Gediton the hero, *whether from* the *side* of the great bridge which used to be called the Bridge of Courage or *whether* they came indirectly from the *side* of the valley of Aphardat, the Valley of the Cranes—the plural of crane is Aphardat in the language of Gumlidata, and not ravens *or* chestnuts *or* galoshes as linguists, such as Mr. X and Mr. True Advisor, Professor Y *and* all the other professors, whose pictures you saw in the illustrated newspapers when they received medals and honorable titles from the royal court.[22]

This enormous period, which includes numerous inadequately punctuated complex and combined sentences, reflects the confused and desultory thought processes of the scholar. From the topic of his research, he goes on to describe the thoroughness of his research, mentions in passing the headaches caused by his imaginary trips in Gumlidata, elaborates on the trips he takes, returns to the things he knows concerning the controversial grammatical form of a certain word in the language of Gumlidata, while throwing in a disparaging comment about his colleagues. The incompatibility of these issues emphasizes the absurdity of lumping all of them into one prolonged period. The incongruity between the tragic destruction of the city, which seems to be the most troublesome issue in the period, and the academic problem that haunts the scholar (from which side did the enemy enter) reflects the skewed academic perspective that gives priority to knowledge over human suffering. Gumlidata's destruction is one of the many things Amzeh *knows* about the city and so it becomes preipheral, conceding the central place to Amzeh's eruditions ("there is not a piece of paper . . . I have not read . . . if I were a king I could reconstruct the city . . . and I know the order . . . and also the name . . . and how many were killed . . ."). For the running theme in this run-on period is what Amzeh knows and does not know about the city of Gumlidata. The subject is Amzeh, not Gumlidata. But the scholar's attempt to prove his superior knowledge by tediously enumerating the city's sites ("its markets, its busy alleys, and its streets and its roads . . .") and the macabre listing of the forms of destruction and death ("and I know how they destroyed it . . . and how many were killed . . . and how many died . . . and how many perished") undercuts the thrust of his speech because it reduces Amzeh's erudition to an insipid series of petty details. The reduction reaches the point of absurdity when it lists the plural forms of the word "crane," which Amzeh affirms to be "Aphardat," not "ravens,"

"chestnuts," or "galoshes." Not only is this linguistic discussion completely irrelevant to the main subject, but the incongruity among the terms as well as the phonetic incompatibility of the singular and plural formations overreaches all the other inanities in the speech. The repetition of conjunctions (if, and, whether, or), nouns (trip, side, destruction), and pleonastic constructions ("I also know the order of its destruction, and I know how they destroyed it") underlines the extraneous and trivial quality of Amzeh's knowledge. Above all, the numerous digressions in the jumbled speech point up the illogical nature of the professor's thought processes, presenting him as a buffoon rather than a serious scholar.[23]

Amzeh's monologue alludes to the only causal link between the character and his academic curiosity. This curiosity remains an enigma because the emotional or psychological motives for it are still unclear. Amzeh's insatiable thirst for additional information on Gumlidata is his exclusive motivation throughout the story. As a monomaniac, Amzeh exemplifies what is, according to Auden, the quintessential comic character: "The comic butt of satire is a person who, though in possession of moral faculties, transgresses the moral law beyond the moral call of temptation, . . . The commonest object of satire is a monomaniac."[24] The author satirizes Amzeh by creating a grotesque incongruity between the context of his life and his perception; there is no correlation between the suffering of the lepers and Amzeh's unabated passion for Gumlidata. He further distorts the relationship between reality and the hero's perception by exaggerating Amzeh's interest in Gumlidata while trivializing his objects of interest. When Amzeh takes his imaginary trips in the city he "talks with the dogs of its temples about their prices."[25] Had Amzeh held his imaginary discussions with Gumlidata's ministers about the city's political predicament, had he argued with its philosophers about Gumlidata's religion, the reader might have forgiven and perhaps even admired the scholar's exclusive obsession with his city. The ironic effect is produced by the incongruity between Amzeh's seriousness and the identity of his imaginary interlocutors—dogs.

Amzeh does not change in the course of the story. His obsession with Gumlidata continues unabated after his arrival at the leprosarium. Not even the sight of the most wretched of human sufferers brings about a change in his limited perception of the world. Amzeh remains a monomaniac throughout the story, a flat and static type. His inability to change turns him into the stock character of comedy.[26] Amzeh's rigidity illustrates Bergson's theory of the mechanical man as the typical comic butt. The capacity to change, develop and adapt to new circumstances is quintessentially human. The mechanical object must be moved by external forces in order to change and, even then, the change is not substantial. Despite the traumatic experience Amzeh undergoes he remains the robot described at the beginning of the story. The ironic emphasis on the mechanical activity of Amzeh is echoed in the ending, which defines the learning as "wisdom." "He would sit and discover secrets which were unknown to all the learned men of all generations, till he came and discovered them. And since these things are numerous and wisdom wide and there is much in it to investigate and examine and understand, he did

not leave his work and did not budge from his place and sat there forevermore."[27] Amzeh, who was on the verge of launching a brilliant academic career with the publication of a book he had been working on for twenty years, finds himself in a leprosarium by sheer coincidence and continues to live there "forevermore." "Wisdom" is said to have taken hold of him, compelling him to isolate himself from humanity and discover secrets that were unknown and will remain unknown "forevermore." What is the "wisdom" which overpowers the protagonist? What are the "secrets" he keeps? Does this "wisdom" justify Amzeh's sacrifice? The answer is alluded to in the nature of the central metonymy.

3. Gumlidata as Metonymy

The city of Gumlidata is perceived by most critics to be a metaphor. Tochner maintains that the city of Gumlidata represents the Jewish tradition, the idolatrous city of Samaria, and modern secular Judaism.[28] Amzeh's book on Gumlidata symbolizes for Tochner the secular research on the history of Judaism as well as modern Hebrew literature.[29] The internal contradiction included in this interpretation does not prevent Tochner from concluding that Agnon "does not hesitate to hint" that the creations of the modern secular scholars are a product of "the destruction of tradition, the loss of the authority of the Torah and the pursuit of foreign values." This perception turns the story into a moralistic-theological parable in which the author expresses "his rebellion against and revulsion from what is accepted and rooted in the taste and thought of the secular generation."[30]

This interpretation is arbitrary, not only because Gumlidata is made to represent opposite things (traditional Judaism and secular modern culture), but also because there is nothing in the story of Gumlidata to suggest that it deals with Judaism at all, either as history or as philosophy. What in "Ad Olam" alludes to the Jewish identity of Gumlidata? Furthermore, if Amzeh is to represent Agnon, why is he shown to disregard the lepers' community (traditional Jewry)? Even if we accept the arbitrary logic of this allegorical interpretation we are confronted with an illogical conclusion, namely, that Agnon both supports and rejects modern secular culture. And if this is so, why does Tochner insist that Agnon "does not hesitate" to reject it?

A similar allegorical orientation brought other critics to the conclusion that the putrid, puss-covered ancient book of Gumlidata, to which Amzeh dedicates the rest of his life symbolizes the holy Torah.[31] In addition to the problems already pointed out, it is unlikely that Agnon who according to this interpretation decries modern secular culture in favor of the Jewish tradition would use a repulsive object to symbolize the holy Torah.[32] By perceiving Gumlidata as metaphor, the allegorists lose sight of its metonymic function: to serve as an indirect means of characterization.[33] The allegorical orientation of the critics also ignores the satirical contours of the metonymy, an oversight that results in exalting what is in fact tacitly deprecated in the story. Thematically, the author satirizes Gumlidata by emphasizing the themes of sex and bestiality in Gumlidata's culture. These ingredients are familiar themes in satire because they

highlight the mundane and physical aspects of human existence.[34] The description of Gumlidata's social and cultural life manipulates both themes interchangeably:

> For it was customary in Gumlidata and its suburbs that when a woman became pregnant and it was not known by whom, her relatives would wait for her to give birth to the baby and then come and take the baby and bring it to the beasts, and they would look for a beast which gave birth at the same time and throw the baby to the beast, and take the beast's baby and bring it to the mother to be nursed with the milk of her breasts. If they do not find a beast's baby, they bring her the young of a tame animal. They took special care with the great ladies, "Gevtaniyot" in their language, for if she [the lady] gave birth, and no one knows [to whom] they would kill the baby and bring her a beasts's baby, because it is not dignified for the daughters of the great to nurse a simple woman's baby, and to have their good blood mixed with the blood of common people.[35]

The outlandish custom of Gumlidata whereby human babies are exchanged for the young of animals implies that this culture is unable to differentiate between human life and animal life, deeming the two of equal importance. Furthermore, the custom that sanctions the murder of a child born of a lady and a common man reveals that human life is inferior to animal life, and that no means are spared to perpetuate social inequality by preventing the fusion of "the good blood" with the "blood of the common people," This description demonstrates that Gumlidata was not less barbaric than the Goths who destroyed her, and her destruction was no great loss to civilization.

Sex and animals appear as the major features that bring about the final destruction of the city. Both are embodied in the character of Eldag, the little Hun girl, captured by the soldiers of Gumlidata and forced to serve as the old king's concubine. After several failed escapes, Eldag determines to undermine her enemies by ruse. She changes her conduct, showing the king "secrets of love and feats of love which he did not know with any boy or girl."[36] Free to roam through the city, the captive finds out that the city's wall by the Valley of the Cranes is shaky. Receiving for a gift a priestly garment with the shape of the Valley of the Cranes, she hangs it on the neck of her playmate a young wild ass and leads the ass toward the opening in the wall. When the wild ass arrives at the camp of the besiegers, Eldag's father deciphers the hint and the enemy storms the city through the Valley of the Cranes. Gumlidata's animal cult and sexual mores, as well as the king's self-indulgence, are operative in the city's final destruction by its enemies. The cumulative evidence culled from the different stories about Gumlidata undermines the initial description of the city as "a great city, the pride of mighty nations." This laudatory evaluation of Gumlidata reflects Adiel Amzeh's bias, not reality. But can we refer to Gumlidata as reality at all?

Amzeh's persistent search for Gumlidata is undercut by a pervasive use of verbal grotesque in reference to Gumlidata. The verbal grotesque is created by the alliteration of *'a* (ayin) and *g* (gimal); " *'Esrim*

shana 'asak 'Adiel 'Amzeh beheqer ta'alumot Gumlidata shehaita'ir gedolah ga'avat goyim 'a sumin, 'ad she 'alu gedudei hagotim va 'asauha 'aremot 'afar ve'et 'amameha 'avdei 'olam."[37] (For twenty years Adiel Amzeh worked on the research of the mysteries of Gumlidata, which was a great city, the pride of mighty nations, till the troops of the Goths attacked it and turned it into heaps of ashes and her people into slaves.)

The pervasive alliteration of 'a and g was perceived by most critics analyzing the story. Some suggested that this extraordinary phenomenon is not significant while others see it as a primary allusion to the covert meaning of the story. Gavriel Moked, for example, suggests that the letter 'a signifies spiritual characters, such as 'Adiel, 'Amzeh, and 'Ada 'Eden, whereas the letter g stands for the concrete and materialistic entities, for instance the city of Gumlidata.[38]

But this explanation pertains only to part of the phenomenon, to the alliteration of the different proper names appearing in the story. It does not deal with the alliteration of the series of nouns, verbs, and abjectives recurring throughout entire passages.

The alliteration, like the assonance and consonance and the rhyme, is a phonetic means that serves to intensify meaning through sound. These devices are most frequent in poetry, where language serves not only as a window through which to observe reality, but as a mirror in which language itself is reflected. In prose narrative the phonetic aspect normally fulfills a peripheral function. This is especially true in the realistic story that pretends to "imitate" reality and present it just as it is. *Focusing on the phonetic aspect of words in the realistic narrative increases the reader's awareness of the fact that a story is essentially made up of words that call attention to the fictive nature of the work.*

The employment of phonetic devices in a realistic story creates a paradox involving the basic principles of the narrative work of art as well as the process of reading, because the author presents the reader with a narrative sign that is supposed to be realistic and yet appears to be fictional. The alliterated words function both as carriers of meaning and as phonetic constructions. In this manner the automatic association between signifier and signified is undermined: the relationship between word and meaning, language and reality, the narrated story and the narrating process becomes highly problematical.

The verbal grotesque functions as an effective satirical weapon.[39] By giving precedence to sound over meaning, the satirist ridicules the meaning of the things he conveys through words. The pervasive alliteration of 'a and g, especially in the passages relating to Gumlidata satirizes Gumlidata's history and culture. The fictive names of Gumlidata's numerous gods, most of which start with a g (Gomesh, Gosh, Gotz, Goah, Goz, Gomed, Gihor, and 'Amol), ridicule the city's outlandish cult. The elaborate name of the city's ruler, Graf ("count") Gifyon Glaskinon Gatra'al ("poison cistern") of the house of Gayra'al ("poison valley"), alludes sarcastically to the rigid caste system of Gumlidata. The alliterated neologisms (gaza'im, gavtan, gandarfus, eygal, geyhaim, gorgeranim, gnognanim, golshaniyot) parody the language of Gumlidata. I do not believe that these neologisms create an authentic "atmosphere of archaic sources."[40] It

seems to me that they produce the opposite effect: the absence of signified referrents and the repetitive letters constitute common devices of the verbal grotesque. A similar effect is created by the references to the grammar of the language of Gumlidata:

> The plural of crane is Aphardat in the language of Gumlidata, and not ravens or chestnuts or galoshes . . . for really a raven in their language is Eldag and in plural Elgadata, for d and g when they appear together in the plural change reverse their order, and what are chestnuts and galoshes in Gumlidatic language, I do not know.[41]

The verbal grotesque is created by the arbitrary rules of Gumlidatic grammar. There is no phonetic or typographical correlation between "agur" (crane) in the singular and "Aphardat" (cranes) in the plural. This plural formation bears no similarity to the formation of "Algadata" from "Eldag." No consistent rules can be discerned. There is no semantic correlation between "orev" (raven), "armonim" (chestnuts), and "ardalayim" (galoshes). Their mutual relationship and their relevance to the context is arbitrary. The alliteration of the letter *'a* (ayin) highlights a phonetic similarity between them, but this only reinforces the semantic gratuity of the collocation and creates a comic effect.[42] The constant repetition of the letters *'a* and *g* at the beginning of names and words relating to Gumlidata implies that the entire vocabulary of the Gumlidatic language consists of words starting with either *'a* or *g*, thereby emphasizing its limited scope, arbitrary nature, and strange sound.

But the verbal grotesque does not only function as a satirical weapon against Gumlidata's culture, history and language. It points out not only its outlandishness but also its fictitiousness. The critical attempt to explain the fictive neologisms counteracts the effect and function of the verbal grotesque.[43] By searching for specific meanings for the specific neologisms the critics "dissolve the forest into trees," as Leo Spitzer puts it; they normalize and neutralize a literary phenomenon whose primary purpose is to unsettle the reader by alluding to the possible unreality of the world it evokes.[44]

The ancient book of Gumlidata is also presented as ridiculous and fictive. This book, for which Adiel Amzeh sacrifices his life, is "soiled with old puss, and even the contaminated abhorred it . . . and it seemed that it was not written on parchment but on the skin of a leper, and not with ink but with puss."[45] In addition to its repulsive appearance, the book contains questionable data. It is described by Ada Eden as "the chronicles of Gumlidata, and its tyrants to be read by king Alarich so that he hears of its exploits and the courage of its great men."[46] The book of Gumlidata then, was written by the leaders of the city, not by an objective historian, and for political purposes, not in order to leave behind a factual account of its history. The "tyrants of Gumlidata" deployed this book as propaganda material against their main enemy, Alarich, the king of the Goths. The polemical purposes of the book invalidate its reliability as an authentic historical source. Furthermore, the story of the city's destruction "was written on the last page of the book that the city's scribe attached to the end of the book."[47] Since this story describes the activities in the camp of

the Huns and the Goths, situated outside the walls of the city, the obvious question is how could the city scribe report the events that took place in the enemy's camp? It will be remembered that the description contains a verbatim report of the dialague between Gediton the hero and Gihol the prankster. How did the city scribe find out the information he offers at the end of the book? The description of the city's final demolition compounds the problem. If there is truth in the scribe's testimony according to which the Goths "set fire to the city, and cut down in their anger infants and babies, boys and old men and women, . . . no living being remained,"[48] how could he report these bleak events unless he was spared himself? If the scribe survived the destruction, like Eldag and the king's grandson, he ought to have mentioned it; if not, somebody else must have added the description of the city's final destruction without actually witnessing it. It is possible that one of the lepers added an imaginary ending, exonerating Gumlidata of its failure to resist the Goths by fabricating the story of Eldag's betrayal and exaggerating the Goths' insidiousness and ruthlessness. Either way, the factual validity of the ancient book, particularly the story of its final destruction is highly questionable. Our protagonist, however, fails to show the slightest sign of caution. On the contrary, he considers the book to be the ultimate authoritative source on Gumlidata.

Amzeh's gullibility indicates that his twenty-year-old research on Gumlidata also consists largely of questionable historical reconstructions. If the supposedly original book of Gumlidata contains undocumented, if not fabricated data, it stands to reason that the reconstruction of the city's history prior to its destruction must be based on mere speculation. This does not prevent our scholar from dedicating twenty years of his life to reconstituting the long-destroyed city with great precision. The author ridicules Amzeh's scholarly work by enumerating the endless details that went into the reconstructive effort:

> Gebhard Goldenthal was prepared to publish the book, Adiel Amzeh's book, although the publication of such a book is very expensive, because of its numerous maps and because of its numerous colors; for the writer colored them with different colors, one color for the city's general view, and one color for its temples, and one color for its altars, and one color for Gomesh and Gosh and Goah and Goz its gods, and one color for its mothers, and one color for its infants and fetuses, their bellies' loads, and one color for Gomed the great, and for Gihor and Amol the pillars of the cult, and one color for the rest of their workers, the priests and priestesses, not to mention the prostitutes born to the ladies and the prostitutes whose fathers are slaves and their mothers are ladies, and the female and male cult prostitutes and the dogs—for everyone has a separate color according to his skin according to his garment, and according to the pay and the price and the work of his labor."[49]

This massive period, consisting of a single main clause, and seven subordinate clauses (one concessive, two causal, and four relative) baffles the reader and complicates the issues involved in Amzeh's work rather than clarifying them. The major parodic device consists of lumping together incongruous subjects: inanimate objects, human beings, animals, and

gods. Temples, altars, and gods appear alongside slaves, fetuses, and prostitutes. The fusion of the spiritual and the bestial, the elevated and the degraded, pretends that there is no real distinction between these incongruous elements. By combining all these elements in one enormous period, the author parodies Amzeh's book, which lists things without offering the necessary differentiation or evaluation. The tedious repetition of the word "color" dramatizes the insipid monotony of what appears to be a colorful book. What is the point in coloring both people and sites in separate colors without attempting to draw more substantial distinctions between them? The scholar fastidiously distinguishes between prostitutes born to ladies and those whose mothers are ladies and fathers are slaves, but he fails to differentiate between dogs and gods, or altars and human beings. Everything is subjected to the systematic examination of objective scholarship via color differentiation. The parodic treatment of Amzeh's work satirizes indirectly the academic approach to history (even the humanities in general), which sacrifices common sense for objectivity and avoids value judgments in order to uphold a scientific posture.

Amzeh's fastidious attempt to find out from which side the troops of Gediton entered Gumlidata illustrates the obsession of certain historians with details at the expense of principles. Amzeh sacrifices the rest of his life in order to ascertain a strategic detail. The incongruity between the trivial detail and Amzeh's serious approach becomes preposterous when we keep in mind that this strategic detail is ascertained on the basis of the last page in the book of Gumlidata, whose dubiousness has already been established. The ironic distance between author and protagonist becomes all the more obtrusive in light of the author's patent affirmation that trivial details, such as the direction of his protagonist's entrance, do not concern him:

> I do not know through which gate he entered and how long it took him to gain an entrance permit . . . And since I am not well versed in details and I do not like speculations, I am abandoning the conjectures and returning to the facts.[50]

Adiel Amzeh sacrifices his life in order to verify from which direction the hero, Gediton, entered Gumlidata. Our author ignores wherefrom his own hero entered the leprosarium. This contrastive analogy reflects the ironic distance between author and protagonist. But the irony works not only vis a vis Amzeh; its effect is much more radical. The author's abrupt reference to himself discloses the fact that although he knows much about his protagonist, there are many details he does not know. The author's unexpected intrusion makes the reader aware not only of the information the author lacks, but that which he supposedly has. The authorial reference to "speculations" versus "facts" appears to reassure the reader of the validity of the narrative material, but this reassurance is ironic because the very act of enunciating the assurance undermines its effectiveness. The reader realizes that the "facts" the author is invoking are fictional ingredients of a fictional tale. These facts are no more reliable than Amzeh's findings on Gumlidata. Thus the ironic odyssey of our author comes full

circle—the reader who has been gloating over Amzeh's misconceptions is stung by the recognition that he is a victim of irony.

4. Realism as Fiction—the Romantic Irony of "Forevermore."

Our protagonist, Adiel Amzeh, does not wonder about the identity, purpose, and authority of Gumlidata's city scribe. His response to the story of Gumlidata is one of empathy and identification; when he reads the story of the city's final destruction, he begins to cry. The scribe himself also identifies with the material he describes. He never admits that his story is not all fact. Not so the author of "Ad Olam": several times in the course of what appears to be a realistic story, he intrudes with irrelevant or digressive remarks, calling attention to his subjective point of view. Anticipating the fact that Amzeh's patron, Gebhard Goldenthal, will neither meet Amzeh nor publish his book, the author intrudes abruptly with the following remark to the reader:

> A pity this rich man did not see him Amzeh for if he did he would have seen that there is even a lovelier appearance than silver and gold. You see my friend for the sake of a moralistic lesson I present in advance the point of the ending.[51]

The abrupt transition from an objective and omniscient to a subjective and personal authorial point of view jolts readers out of their complacency. They now become privy to the way in which the author manipulates the narrative material (anticipation) as well as the readers' own attitudes (by teaching them a moralistic lesson). By pointing up his authorial disadvantages ("I do not know through which gate he entered . . . I do not know whether he did or did not hear . . .") the author is undermining his reliability. By inserting technical comments regarding the narrative process of creation ("... I will tell what the dead letters told, and I will tell briefly what is told there at length . . .") the author implies that the reality confronted by the reader is fictional and artificial, that it is made of words and literary constructions. The artist seems to be poking fun at himself as well as at the reader.

Seen from this perspective, the verbal grotesque parodies not only the metadiegetic story of Gumlidata but the entire story of "Ad Olam." Because the verbal grotesque distorts the link between signifier and signified it also parodies the means by which the author communicates with his reader. The neologisms that are inserted into conventional linguistic contexts and the alliterations of conventional words sever the automatic link between a word and its assigned meaning, thereby highlighting the essentially arbitrary link between sound and sense, which constitutes the rudimentary foundation of all language. The frightening-comic effect of the verbal grotesque in "Ad Olam" dramatizes for readers the precariousness of their own position as readers of a fictional tale, mediated by an arbitrary language.[52] Readers soon realize that the troublesome *'a* and g recur not only in the names of Gumlidata's heroes but also in the names of "their" story. In essence, *'A*diel *'A*mzeh, *'A*da *'E*den, and Gebhard Goldenthal are not different from *'E*ldag, the hero Gediton, and the king Gifyon Golaskinon.

The limited irony directed at scholarly pretentiousness, the "science" of history, and the monomaniac obsession with one's work expands in "Ad Olam" to encompass the precariousness of fictional writing, of art, and of language. If we construe "Ad Olam" as an ideological "historiosophical" allegory about Judaism and Zionism, then most of the disquieting elements in the story will naturally be considered as superfluous and oppressive "riddles serving a private myth."[53] If, on the other hand, we approach "Ad Olam" as a work of art, these riddles become essential, for they make the reader aware of the tensions between fiction and fact, word and meaning, perception and reality. The riddles of "Ad Olam" may be frustrating to those who search for ideological reassurances; they are indispensable to readers who prefer far-reaching questions to restrictive answers.

The University of Texas at Austin

NOTES

1. Meshulam Tochner, *Pesher agnon,* (The Meaning of Agnon), (Ramat Gan, 1968, pp. 130-132.
2. Eddy Zemach, "Hatefisa hahistoriosofit bishnayim misipuravhame ha meuharim shel Agnon" (The Historiosophic Outlook in Two of Agnon's Later Stories), *Hasifrut,* Vol. 1, no. 2 (April-May, 1968), p. 418.
3. Hillel Barzel, *Sipurei ahavah shel shai agnon,* (Ramat Gan, 1975), p. 160.
4. Dan Miron, "Tsiyun derekh vetamrur azhara bevikoret agnon" (A Signpost and a Warning Signal in the Criticism of Agnon), *Moznayim,* Vol. 27, no. 5-6, (April-May, 1968), p. 352.
5. Gavriel Moked, *Shivhei adiel amzeh* (The Praises of Adiel Amzeh), (Tel Aviv, 1957).
6. *Shivhei adiel amzeh,* p. 88.
7. *Sipurei ahavah,* p. 163.
8. "Adiel Amzeh is, then, at the same time the scholar of the overt text of the story, and the creator-author's biographical personality in the covert test," *Pesher Agnon,* p. 128. For the allegorical interpretation of Amzeh as the Jewish people see Hillel Barzel, *Sipurei ahava,* p. 127.
9. S. Y. Agnon, "Ad Olam" (Forevermore) in *Ha'esh ve'haetsim* (The Fire and the Wood) (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962); "Forevermore," tr. Joel Blocker in *Israeli stories* ed. Joel Blocker (New York: Schocken, 1965). The following references to the work are based on my own translation. E. F.
10. Henri Bergson, "Le Rire," *Oeuvres,* (Paris, 1959), pp. 401, 414, 419; My translaton—E. F.
11. "Ad olam," pp. 315-316. The italics are mine—E. F.
12. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life,* tr. J. F. Crawford, (New York, 1954), p. 323.
13. "Ad olam," p. 318.
14. "Ad olam," p. 318.
15. "Ad olam," p. 320.
16. "Ad olam," p. 325.
17. "Ad olam," p. 333.
18. "Ad olam," p. 333.
19. "Ad olam," p. 324.
20. "Ad olam," p. 329.

21. "Ad olam," p. 329.
22. "Ad olam," pp. 323-324. The italics are mine—E. F.
23. Koestler explains the comic effect of the digression as follows: "The abrupt transfer of a train of thought from one operative field to another leads to its separation from its original emotional charge . . . This sudden dissociation of intellectual and emotional state, the rupture between knowing and feeling is a fundamental characteristic of the comic," Arthur Koestler, *Insight and Outlook,* (New York, 1949), p. 65.
24. W. H. Auden, "Notes on the Comic," *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays,* (New York, 1962), pp. 371-385.
25. "Ad olam," p. 319.
26. "The comic element is the incorrigible element in every human being; the capacity to learn from experience or instruction is forbidden to all comic creations and to what is comic in you and me." Mary MacCarthy, "Characters in Fiction," *On the Contrary,* (New York, 1951), p. 289.
27. "Ad olam," p. 334.
28. *Pesher agnon,* p. 134.
29. *Pesher agnon,* p. 136.
30. *Pesher agnon,* pp. 136, 148; My translation—E. F.
31. Eddy Zemach, "Hatefisa," pp. 381-385.
32. Shlomo Zucker, "Be'ayathap ha-perush shel 'edo ve'enam' ve'ad olam' le-shai agon," (On the Problem of Interpreting S. Y. Agnon's 'Edo and Enam' and 'Forevermore," *Hasifrut,* Vol. 2, no. 2, (January, 1970), pp. 415-417.
33. On the metaphorical and metonymic functions of objects in narrative, see W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel,* (Ithaca, New York, 1965), p. 35.
34. Matthew Hodgart, "Origins and Principles," *Satire,* (Toronto and New York, 1969), pp. 12-32. Concerning the function of animals in satire, Hodgart says: "The animal world is continually drawn on by the satirist; he reminds us that homo sapiens despite his vast spiritual aspirations is only a mammal that feeds, defecates, menstruates, ruts, gives birth and catches unpleasant diseases," *Ibid,* p. 118.
35. "Ad olam," p. 331.
36. "Ad olam," p. 330.
37. "Ad olam," p. 315.
38. Baruch Kurzweil believes that the alliterative game is unproductive and amounts to "riddles serving a private myth." *Masot al sipurei shay agnon,* [Essays on the stories of S. Y. Agnon], (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1975), p. 325. Gavriel Moked's interpretation of the alliterative 'a and g is offered in "Bein 'Edo ve-enam le 'Ad Olam," [Between 'Edo and Enam and Forevermore], *Akhshav,* Vol. 25-28, (Spring, 1973), pp. 77-93.
39. Heinrich Schneegans, *Geschichte der grotesken Satire,* (Strussburg, 1894), p. 40.
40. *Pesher agnon,* p. 134.
41. "Ad olam," p. 324.
42. "To be comic, the two things they, [the words], they denote must either be so incongruous with each other that one cannot imagine a real situation in which a speaker would need to bring them together, or so irrelevant to each other, that they could only become associated by pure chance." *The Dyer's Hand,* p. 380.
43. Meshulam Tochner interprets both the neologisms and the names of Gumlidata's gods by drawing on Hebrew homonyms, *Pesher Agnon,* p. 134.
44. In reference to the verbal grotesque in the work of Rabelais, Spitzer calls attention to the critics' oversights in this regard: "But by explaining every

coinage separately, by dissolving the forest into trees, the commentators lose sight of the whole phenomenon; they no longer see the forest—or rather jungle that Rabelais must have had before his eyes . . . He [Rabelais], creates word families, representative of gruesome fantasy-beings, which have reality only in language, which are established in an intermediate world between reality and irreality, between the nowhere that frightens and the 'here' that 'reasures.'" *Linguistics and Literary History—Essays in Stylistics*, (New York, 1962), pp. 16-17.

45. "Ad olam," pp. 328-329.
46. "Ad olam," p. 326.
47. "Ad olam," p. 332.
48. "Ad olam," p. 332.
49. "Ad olam," pp. 316-317
50. "Ad olam," p. 328.
51. "Ad olam," p. 318.
52. Leo Spitzer describes the effect of verbal grotesque as ". . . a moment of shock followed by a feeling of reassurance; to be swept towards the unknown frightens, but realization of the benignly fanciful results gives relief; laughter, our physiological reaction on such occasions, arises precisely out of a feeling of relief following upon a temporary breakdown of our assurance," *Linguistics and Literary History,* p. 161.
53. *Masot,* p. 325.