

# You Can't Go Home Again

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## Only Yesterday

By S. Y. Agnon.

Translated by Barbara Harshav.

652 pp. Princeton, N.J.:

Princeton University Press. \$35.

A few years ago I was talking to Alfred Kazin about his classic study of American literature, "On Native Grounds." In the course of that conversation, Kazin mentioned that his daughter had gone to live in Israel. "Well," I said, "she's really on native ground." Kazin was not amused. A child of immigrants, he had devoted himself to the American literary tradition too zealously to allow someone to imply, even in jest, that ancient affiliations trumped modern American ones.

I recalled this conversation while reading "Only Yesterday," in part because the question of what constitutes native ground is a driving preoccupation of this epic about the Jewish settlement of Palestine in the early years of the 20th century. But Kazin's response may also help explain why so great a writer as S. Y. Agnon, winner of the 1966 Nobel Prize in literature, seems to linger on the margins of American literary consciousness. This is the first time "Only Yesterday," published in Hebrew in 1945 and considered by many critics of Hebrew literature to be Agnon's masterpiece, has been translated into English.

Of course Agnon (1887-1970) is a notoriously difficult writer. In this case the story he tells is deeply rooted in the history of the Second Aliya, the period between 1904 and 1914 when idealistic Jews, primarily from Russia, moved to Palestine with the dream of working the land and establishing Hebrew-speaking collectives. Agnon's hero, Isaac Kumer, is a Zionist pilgrim making allegorical progress from his home in Galicia, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to Ottoman Palestine, where the nascent dream of Jewish autonomy was taking root. Ancient religious longing, modern political aspirations and personal dreams of liberation all intersect in Isaac.

Agnon expects his readers to know the immediate history he is referring to and to understand the religious context that both created Isaac and that Isaac is tearing himself away from. Isaac is a humble Jewish shopkeeper from Eastern Europe, living in a poor and pious world that even before the Holocaust had reached a dead end. But unlike the millions of Jews who left for America in the early years of the 20th century, Isaac becomes a Zionist. He has found an escape route that leads into the modern political future but that is shaped by traditional channels of messianic longing. The way in which these contradictory forces nurture each other and destroy each other is part of the drama of the novel.

"Only Yesterday" proceeds by a series of oppositions. Isaac dreams of working the land of Israel but winds up instead as a house painter living in town. He settles in Jaffa, the secular city, and abandons religious observance, but he is drawn to Jerusalem, where Orthodox Jews have been living for hundreds of years in a kind of shtetl with stone walls. He is infatuated with Sonya, the alluring secular Russian Jew, but he marries Shifra, the pious daughter of an Orthodox fanatic who specializes in outraged excommunications.

There is a deceptive element of surface simplicity to "Only Yesterday" that is not unlike other tales of immigrant education. Isaac goes to Palestine to "build the land and be built by it," as the Zionist slogans say, only to discover that Jewish landowners prefer cheap Arab labor to Jewish workers. He goes believing that all who immigrate to Israel are brothers bound by common purpose, only to discover how easy it is to be cheated and snubbed and how lonely life in the new terrain can be. He goes dreaming of a country flowing with milk and honey, only to discover an inhospitable land that bakes him in the blazing sun and threatens disease at every turn.

Gradually Isaac becomes superficially adapted to his new life. He finds a profession and fits himself into the country and its customs. But in the end he is destroyed in a way so complex and bitter that it overturns any simple notions of Zionist redemption and calls everything in the novel into question.

It is tempting to see Isaac as a kind of Eastern European Don Quixote, who fills his head with Zionist propaganda and then charges out into the world, only to slam into a reality wildly at variance with biblical promise or Zionist prediction. What vastly complicates this reading is that Don Quixote was a lone dreamer and the Zionist enterprise was a collective fantasy that, against all odds, actually came to pass. "If you will it, it is no dream," Theodor Herzl's famous dictum, hangs over this novel, and so does the idea that exile is a dream and return is reality. Agnon's surrealism -- and there are long dreamlike passages in this book -- is thus an act of high modernism as well as an expression of traditional Jewish theology.

The paradox behind "Only Yesterday" is that the pioneer madmen were the visionaries, and those sober skeptics who stayed behind, in seeming safety, were the ones who were destroyed. By the time Agnon was writing his book, the Zionist dream was in fact succeeding, so the bitter end of Isaac is itself overturned by the reality of the emerging Jewish homeland and by the sheer fact that Agnon is telling his tale in Hebrew.

Agnon expects his readers to appreciate the terrible ironies of Jewish history, just as he assumes that his readers' ears are educated to the richly allusive nature of his writing. Agnon was a linguistic pioneer who pitched his modern Hebrew prose on an ancient foundation. His language stretches back to biblical times and weaves in almost everything that came after, from Mishnaic and Talmudic and liturgical elements to modern Hebrew poems and Zionist slogans. Barbara Harshav struggles heroically with the impossible task of wrestling Agnon into English, and the volume has a useful glossary at the back and an excellent introduction by Benjamin Harshav.

In some sense, translation isn't just a problem facing the reader of Agnon, it's a problem facing his characters as well. How, after 2,000 years of wandering around Europe, in the course of which Jews became the People of the Book, could they translate themselves back into the land of Israel? What would they take with them? What would they leave behind?

Agnon, although a Zionist, was profoundly devoted to Jewish tradition. Unlike many of the pioneers who went to make a new life in the Land of Israel, Agnon tried to take everything with him, which is why his writing is so packed, so intensely allusive. This is one of the glories of Agnon's prose, but it can also make him seem like a man running through the desert carrying his entire library on his back. Agnon himself moved to Palestine from Galicia in 1908 and left for Germany in 1912. He returned in 1924, spending the rest of his life in Jerusalem, but his earlier failure haunts his writing. So does the mixture of pride and shame at being an intellectual in a society that worshiped farmers, a writer in a culture founded on a dream of physical labor, a lover of Eastern European

Jewish life in a nation hell-bent on casting the past aside.

Of course all these paradoxes help make Agnon the great modernist that he is. Agnon lived in Germany in the early 20's and was steeped in Kafka and Freud and a host of modernist writers. This is something oddly overlooked by Saul Bellow, who included a story by Agnon in his 1963 anthology "Great Jewish Short Stories" but then wrote of Agnon that "entirely immersed in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, he apparently has little interest in Western literary traditions."

Like Kazin's response, there is something in Bellow's note that suggests a discomfort with the parallel universe Agnon inhabited. Perhaps it was safer to imagine that a writer as overtly Jewish as Agnon, who wrote in Hebrew and wove strands of the Psalms and of rabbinic wisdom into his fiction, was at odds with modernism and was at odds with America too. America, after all, saw itself as a new Promised Land, and Jewish American writers accepted that premise in their own way.

So have many readers of American Jewish fiction, who mistake Ellis Island for Mount Sinai, and the progress into American assimilation as the great, inevitable Jewish adventure. But that may well be changing as a younger generation of writers, and readers, makes its way back to the cultural literacy required to read Agnon. In that regard, this translation makes its appearance at a wonderful time.

We have hardly finished with Agnon. On the contrary. As that modern fictional sage Dr. Spielvogel -- Alexander Portnoy's psychiatrist -- remarks, "Now vee may perhaps to begin."