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 Agnon Encounters Freud

In the engaging discussions of texts and their interpreters held over the past twenty years, the author has been treated as a nuisance or a pariah. Increasingly, the reader or critic emerges as the producer of meaning. We, the critics, either brazenly usurp the title of author or patronizingly relegate the author to a fiction of our imagination or implication. My argument here should therefore be understood as a reaction to this arrogant posture, to what I would call “the critical fallacy.” In simple terms, I am going to ask: What do we readers do with an author who won’t go away? What do we do with an author who asserts his presence in every line, who virtually challenges his reader to a duel—a friendly duel, to be sure, since no one is killed and no blood is spilled—but a duel from which the reader comes away humbled.

That Agnon asserts his presence in every line should be obvious to anyone who has read one page of his Hebrew, written in a style that is flagrantly non-normative, though correct, dazzlingly dense, relentlessly demanding the reader’s full participation. The reader’s encounter with that peculiar style is the background against which all other considerations must take place. Though I shall make few references to style in the following remarks, I assume that you realize that style and what it implies, informs, and underlies everything I say.

Readers familiar either with Agnon’s writings after the 1931 Berlin Edition or with the criticism that attended it, are fully aware of the critical dictum that many of these works echo Kafka because, we are told, Agnon was influenced by Kafka—whatever the word *influence* means. Since I have dealt with that problem elsewhere I won’t address it now. What I would like to present here is the exciting and far reaching notion that Agnon in mid-career, i.e. sometime after 1931, became keenly aware

of the broader implications of the Freudian concepts of language in general, and dream language, in particular; he understood both their challenges and opportunities, and struggled to master this language. I will suggest, then, that much of what we have thought was *Kafka* is really *Freud*. The implications of the shift in perspective should be immediately obvious. At the very least, it opens new avenues of interpretation and might aid us in understanding what was hidden from us before.

Two distinctions should be drawn at the very outset of our argument. Critics have referred vaguely to something Freudian in Agnon since the 1930s, but they have, to my knowledge, neither proved the point, nor specified what they mean by Freudian, nor suggested implications for our reading. Second, we are not primarily conducting an exercise in psychoanalytic interpretation, but rather an historical investigation.

First, a grounding in history. What evidence do we have that Agnon ever heard of Freud? For those who need strictly positivistic proof, there are, to my knowledge, at least two significant references in Agnon's writing to Freud, his "system" (*shita*) or his "circle" (*siya*). The first is found in a letter to his wife, Esther, dated February 16, 1925, and demonstrates knowledge of Freud's theory of the latent meaning of slips of the tongue. The second is so revelatory that it deserves fuller citation. In the first version (*Davar*: December, 1932) of the well-known story, "Panim aherot" (A different face) the hero, Michael Hartmann, tells his ex-wife, Toni, a frightening dream he had. The narrator then comments:

Hartmann was grateful that she did not interpret his dream as would Freud and his circle. His dream was fine just as it was [without interpretation], like snow before it melts.

In the first sentence, Freud is connected with the interpretation of dreams; the Hebrew roots (psr) or (prs) and (hlm) appear together. The interpretation of dreams, I submit, is the central aspect of the Freudian enterprise that intrigued Agnon; my studies, in fact, convince me that the specific Freudian work that intrigued Agnon was *Die Traumdeutung* (The Interpretation of Dreams) (1899) and I would suggest that in that book he focused upon Chapters V and VI (though Chapter II is possible). In the second sentence about Michael Hartmann, where we are told that Hartmann preferred his dreams uninterpreted since they are then "like snow before it melts," we find an acute awareness of the problematic, disturbing feature of Freudian dream-interpretation. It reveals many dirty facts of our psychic life that we would rather hide or repress under a surface of white snow.

In addition to these two references—and there are probably more—let me adduce two other biographical facts:

1. There was, in the personal library of Mrs. Esther Agnon, a set of *Die Gesammelte Werk* (The Collected Works) of Sigmund Freud.
2. According to Mrs. Emunah Yaron, Agnon's daughter, the tireless editor of his posthumous works, Mrs. Agnon would read sections of Freud out loud to Agnon in the late 1930s, perhaps into the 1940s, together with Kafka and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.

To expand the picture, I would like to refer to what I call “The Eitingon connection,” which I offer as one of a variety of personal connections Agnon had with individuals for whom Freud was not merely the name of a controversial Viennese doctor who created a scandal in Vienna as early as the first decade of this century, but one of the revolutionary intellectual giants of the twentieth century. Max Eitingon, a psychiatrist with strong Jewish and even Zionist sympathies (he first visited Jerusalem in 1910), was one of Freud's staunchest disciples, a trusted member of the inner circle. Independently wealthy until the Crash of 1929, he often supported Freud financially in a variety of enterprises. Though outwardly unpretentious, he was clearly an aggressive organizer with a sense of mission. He was the chief Freudian in Berlin from 1909 until 1933 when he migrated to Jerusalem, where he and his wife struck up a friendship with the Agnons. Eitingon founded the Berlin Psychiatric Society in 1920, the International Psychiatric Association in 1930, and the Palestine Psychoanalytic Society in 1933. From 1934 through 1938 he made annual trips to Vienna and London to visit Freud. The memorial volume published in his honor in 1950 contains contributions by such an array of authors as Anna Freud, Marie Bonaparte, Arnold Zweig, and Shai Agnon. The psychoanalytic institute in Jerusalem is named after him.

The “Eitingon connection” is one definite personal linkage of Agnon with the world of the Freudians, but there may be others. Agnon could not escape a familiarity with Freudian concepts after 1934 and probably knew something about Freud much earlier from his sojourn in Germany, Berlin in particular, from 1913-1924. I find it hard to conceive of Agnon's ignorance of Freud in Germany of that period, particularly since Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and character) (1903) continued to generate all sorts of debates about sexuality and Judaism. It is also possible that Agnon as an adolescent in Buczacz, a provincial town

of the Hapsburg empire, knew something of the furor created by Dr. Freud in the Hapsburg capital, Vienna. At some time, finally, Agnon must have discovered that Freud's father's family stemmed from his own town, Buczacz, and Agnon never forgot who came from Buczacz and who didn't.

Now that I have established plausible historical grounds for Agnon's encounter with Freud, I can ask what exactly do we mean when we use the cultural term Freud. There are three areas of Freudian interest that we should explore:

1. The most accessible and popularly known area is that of dream symbols, or rather, the specific items of symbolism found in *Die Traumdeutung*, Chapters 2, 5, and 6. Any literate adult in the past two generations knows all about the erotic equivalences of umbrellas, and keys, and walking sticks, and staircases, and ladders, and boxes, and mounds, and keyholes, and so forth. There is no aspect of Freud's writing that lends itself so readily to vulgar interpretation and parody as these symbols. I suggest that Agnon realized the potential of these symbols, both for his craft as a writer of fiction and, perhaps, for parody. It is very possible that certain passages in his stories should be read in this light, as parody. The story "Panim aherot" (A different face) is full of these symbols and they could serve both purposes.
2. The boundaries of psychological realism were substantially expanded by Freud's investigations and a writer with Agnon's interests both in the psychodynamics of guilt and doubt, on the one hand, and the relations between the sexes, on the other, would be eager to expand his narrative capabilities in these areas. The publication of "Panim aherot" and "Pat shelema" (A whole loaf) within one month of each other in December 1932 and January 1933, respectively, is no accident. They represent the two facets of Agnon's narrative interests that were most enriched by his encounter with Freud. In 1942, when he published the volume entitled *Elu va'elu*, (These and those) he contrasted his pious tales category with another category that includes two subcategories: the surrealistic stories of *Sefer hama'asim* (The book of deeds) and the two love stories, "Panim aherot" and "Harofe ugerushato" (The doctor and his divorcee). This fact has escaped most critics, as has the possibility that the doctor in "The Doctor and his Divorcee" might be a parody of Max Eitingon himself.

3. Freud, more cogently than anyone before him, systematically presented dreams and free-associated thoughts as a language that can be read and for which he has discovered the key. In the famous opening paragraphs to Chapter VI of the *Interpretation of Dreams* we read:

The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation.

If it is our business to read the grammar of these languages, it is within the power of a talented writer to reproduce these languages in his fictions. I would suggest that Agnon's obsession with arcane language, both verbal and non-verbal, which we find in such stories as "Shevuat emunim" (The Betrothal) "Ido ve'Einam" (Ido and Einam), "Ad olam" (Forevermore) and the novel, *Shirah* all stem from these powerful Freudian notions.

There are, to be sure, many other aspects of the Freudian universe which would have interested Agnon, more specific items like the contrast between Eros and Thanatos, the Oedipus Complex, the role of the fantasy life, the categorization of various types of mental illness, or simply Freud's prodigious talents as a writer, as a spinner of tales called "case-studies"—but I shall focus for the present on the first three areas: dream symbolism, the new concept of psychological realism, and the readability of all aspects of human behavior. And since these do not appear separately, but are usually interwoven, we shall refer to them in passing while looking at several specimen stories. In our brief analysis, we shall present examples of possible investigation.

The novel *Sippur pashut* (A simple story) of 1935 immediately comes to mind since it deals with the madness of its main character, Hirshel Horowitz, and his cure in the sanatorium of Dr. Langsam in Lemberg. The story, set in the fictional Galician town of Shibush (the literary correlative of Agnon's home town, Buczacz) about 1907, brilliantly captures many aspects of life of those times and places. Its real strength lies in the portrayal of the relations between the various characters, primarily between Hirshel and his domineering mother Tsirel, Hirshel's frustrated love for Bluma Nacht, and his initially unhappy marriage with Mina Tsiemlich. We can see Agnon's assimilation of Freud in his detailed portrayal of Hirshel's derangement, in the subtle construction of plausible

causes of this derangement in the behavior of the mother, and in the therapy offered by Dr. Langsam. The attention accorded to the therapeutic method evidences awareness of psychotherapy. While one critic has called this method Jungian (without really explaining why) I have argued elsewhere that the method is at least consciously non-Freudian and takes some of its main features from Nahman of Bratslav. Most important is the use of language, of narration, in the cure: Dr. Langsam cures Hirshel, not by guiding him along an analysis of his fantasies and screen-memories, but by relating to Hirshel pleasant, nostalgic stories of Dr. Langsam's own childhood in a shtetl which resembles Shibush. That the narrative art has the power to cure the insane, to repair the broken vessels of this world, is of course, a romantic concept, but employed here in this situation and with all the implications of the Agnonic narrative voice, argues forcefully for a keen awareness of Freudian concepts.

Let me move now to a comparison of two seemingly unrelated stories; "Ma'ase ha'ez" (A fable about a goat) (1925) and "El harofe" (To the doctor) (1932). The first story is a well known Agnonic pious tale while the second is one of his surrealist stories of *Sefer hama'asim*. I have never seen these two compared, but when we look closely at them, we notice strikingly similar situations.

In both, the father is sick, the doctors really cannot help, and it is the obligation of the son to secure help for the father. In both cases, the son fails. In "Ma'ase ha'ez" the narrator speaks like a traditional pious story teller, opening his story with an Aggadic phrase, referring to Biblical verses, uttering pious asides, and creating a fantastic tale. The boy follows a magical goat through a cave that leads him to somewhere in Eretz Yisrael near Safed. While the story certainly lends itself to a Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation—which I will not enter into now—the technique of the story does not, in my opinion, evidence an accommodation to or exploitation of Freudian concepts.

"El harofe" (To the Doctor) leads us into an entirely different world. Here the tortured, hesitant protagonist tell us, in his own voice, that his father was sick and he, the son, had to get to the doctor to secure help. That the doctor might be a source of aid for the dying father is doubtful, since he is described as a wanton fellow who likes to drink and play cards. What we read is actually the narrator's description of his mental anguish. Our attention is directed to the agonized workings of his mind in which time and space can be condensed into simultaneous layered images, as it is in dreams: Bordeaux is in England; two alter egos, Mr. Andermann and a pious old cantor, struggle to lead the narrator, each in

his own way; the narrator's resolve is distracted by peas or lentils on the steps or a hole in his pants; and reality begins to quake. The story ends, in fact, with the protagonist on the bridge over the heaving waters of a river, certainly a more disturbed scene than the pastoral, hopeful ending of "Ma'ase ha'ez" which suggests that the boy is still alive in Eretz Yisrael, that the way to Eretz Yisrael may no longer be gained by miracle and faith, but it is still possible to find it. When one compares the mode of production of one story with that of the other, the difference in narrative concept emerges in fascinating detail.

In comparing "Ma'ase ha'ez" with "El harofe", I have tried to demonstrate the advantages of analyzing two stories with similar kernels but different narrative treatments. Another fruitful technique is the comparison of an earlier version of a love story with a later version of the same story. In this case I shall refer to "Panim aherot" (A different face), which I have already mentioned: the first version was published in 1932, the second in 1941.

1. The first version contains, as I have mentioned, a specific reference to Freud. This reference was omitted in the second version.
2. In general, the revisions made in the text for the second version exhibit a greater awareness of psychological realism, of concretization of psychic states, than the first version.
3. The story contains two dream sequences, one composed of fragments of the hero's recent experiences, the other of childhood screen-memories. These are precisely the two main dream categories that Freud mentioned in *Die Traumdeutung*.
4. The story is densely larded with standard Freudian dream symbols: the parasol, the flowers, the cigarette, the ladder, the mound, the fireflies, rooms, walls, etc. At times, the erotic symbolism is so dense that this reader begins to sense that Agnon is playing with us, that there might be, in this moving story of discovery of love after divorce, a note of parody. If this possible parody is dissonant to some readers, I would argue that the varied, ever-changing Agnonic narrative voice is one of the great inventions in modern Hebrew prose.

Comparing version with version, then, one can watch, with fascination, the development of this prodigious literary talent, its struggle with what I think are notions culled from Freud. Various types of evidence have allowed us to establish that Agnon was not only aware of sections of Freud's writings, but realized that here was a literary and cultural

presence he had to confront. I would like, in closing, to push the argument one step further by returning to my point of departure, to the author. If we can demonstrate, or even imagine that Agnon could consciously manipulate and generate Freudian texts for narrative purposes just as he so obviously generates rabbinic texts, we might ask: In what way should this possibility condition our reading of certain stories of Agnon?

This question intrigued me as I recently reread two fine efforts at psychoanalytic criticism, that by Gerson Shaked of the death-wish etc., in “Shevuat emunim” (The betrothal) and that by Yael Feldman of the key motif in Agnon’s novel of 1938–39, *Oreah nata lalun* (A guest for the night). Shaked argues cogently that the matrix of the story is to be found in the passive hero’s ambiguous relationship to his mother. As a result of these relations, he cannot form a meaningful erotic attachment to any of the young women of Jaffa of the period (The Second Aliyah). This matrix situation is forcefully conveyed and given psychic depth by a variety of techniques and motifs that are unmistakably Freudian: the condensation of the figures of the two mothers and a sister (here: Shoshana Ehrlich); the transferred Oedipal complex of Rechnitz; the “death wish,” the attraction to care-free death both in situations and in motifs such as sleeping sickness, the sea, mummies, stuffed animals; the pervasive dread of incest; intimations of homosexuality, both female and male; the reference to Otto Weininger’s *Geschlecht und Charakter*, classical antiquity, Latin, Homer, the Mediterranean Sea, seaweeds.

Shaked’s analysis of these clusters of topoi and motifs carries us to unprecedented depths in the understanding of this story. His argument is utterly persuasive—yet it leaves me with the uneasy feeling that the author of this story, “The Betrothal,” is patently familiar with the entire world of Freudian concepts, symbols, and focal situations. I have argued at length that the hero of the story, Dr. Yaakov Rechnitz, is constructed from pieces of Sigmund Freud’s life history. The young Freud began his career with a study of eels at the marine biology station at Trieste. Rechnitz, also from Vienna, studies primitive sea life in Jaffa. Both Freud and Rechnitz are fascinated with the world of Greek antiquity. If Agnon is that aware of that world, he may be manipulating it just as he manipulates the world of references to rabbinic literature by creating pseudo-midrashim or pseudo-proverbs. He is also a wizard at conjuring up mock-passages of Zionist pamphlets, standard bourgeois thought-patterns, political dribble, and academic nonsense. I realize, to be sure, that many psychoanalytically oriented critics might argue that it makes no

difference whether or not Agnon deliberately inserts an erotic symbol here or an Oedipal projection there, or a death wish here and there, but given my sense of Agnon's dialogic play with his reader conveyed through that truly uncanny style (in the Freudian sense: *unheimlich*) I begin to get a bit wary—even suspicious. I ask myself: Is he doing it again? Is he “playing” with us? If we can now accept the fact that Agnon is parodying the style of the pious tale in *Hakhnasat kalla* (The bridal canopy) (1931), the style of Zionist or bourgeois thought-patterns in *Temol shilshom* (Only yesterday) (1945), the style of the academic world in *Shirah*—and many other styles in many other places—why, I ask, shouldn't we suspect that he is parodying the style of the psychoanalytic report, particularly that found in *Die Traumdeutung* where the self-dramatizing narrator/analyst is Sigmund Freud? This may seem preposterous to some, but then if you would claim in the late 1930s that *Hakhnasat kalla* is a comic/ironic/parodic novel, most readers would recommend you to Dr. Max. Eitingon's psychiatric clinic.

In conclusion, let me phrase my main point in another way. In a pair of perceptive articles, Yael Feldman has treated the key-motif in *Oreah nata lalun* to a searching, semiotic and psychoanalytic analysis. Among the many passages she treats, there are two, found towards the end of the novel, for which I would like to offer alternate readings.

As the narrator is about to leave the town of Shibush for Eretz Yisrael, he visits the Beth Midrash to take leave of it, for that was the focal point of the action of the entire novel. Since he no longer has a key, he peeps through the keyhole and remarks that “the Beth Midrash shrank within the ball of this man's eye.” Feldman interprets this as an act of voyeurism, of looking in. I would read it more concretely to mean that from that point on the Beth Midrash exists only within the eye-ball or the consciousness of the narrator. There is nothing left to Shibush except the narrator's ability to portray it in his fictions. We, the readers, can know Shibush only through him, since outside of his consciousness, Shibush no longer exists; it cannot be visited. The author, then, controls all.

Following this idea, we come to the final chapter in which the narrator/author returns to Jerusalem and mysteriously finds the old, huge key to the Beth Midrash in his suitcase. He takes it, locks it up in a box, and ties the small key to the box on a string that he hangs from his neck. Feldman reads this locking up of the original key as the awareness that the authentic key can never really find a proper new home in Eretz Yisrael. I would suggest, however, that in locking up the key and keeping the new key to the keybox for himself, the author is telling us that

the key to full understanding of his fictive world—and that, again, is all we have left—is something which he alone has.

We may possess or fashion all sorts of interpretive keys—old keys, new keys—but we will never possess the key to total understanding; we shall never totally possess the world of Agnon's fiction, Agnon's personal Beth Midrash. This, I find, is a sobering thought in an age when interpreters arrogate to themselves primacy over the author.