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The Author, His Code, and His Reader: The Kafka-Agnon Polarities

"I tell you, 'Rabbi Binyomin,' that Mendele's style is not the last word in Hebrew fiction."

In a retrospective article written in 1933, the addressee of this statement, "Rabbi Binyomin"¹ recalls his meetings with Agnon in Jaffa in 1908–11, when both were young, aspiring writers. In one memorable scene, the two were walking along the Mediterranean shore when Agnon protested that Mendele's style, for all its monumental stature, did not lend itself to the description of nuanced psychological states and, as such, was not "the last word in Hebrew fiction."² The implication, of course, was that he (Agnon) would do better. The author, recording this event after Agnon had published the four volumes of the first edition of his collected works in 1931, implies that Agnon had indeed succeeded in forging a new prose idiom in Hebrew, something that transcended Mendele, even though in 1908 when Agnon expressed these aspirations, "Rabbi Binyomin" thought his claims presumptuous.

While the sequence of events in this reminiscence might not be entirely accurate, the statements and descriptions of personalities and sentiments have a ring of authenticity and coherence. Mendele, after all, was the giant of modern Hebrew prose fiction in those days and every young writer had to confront this looming figure. Some aped him, but others like Brenner, Agnon, Gnessin, and Shofman found their own individual style and voice. "Rabbi Binyomin's" analysis of the situation is, in general, precise; Agnon's prodigious energies, his dandyish playfulness,

his friendship with Brenner, the favorable reception of two of his Jaffa stories, "Agunot" (1908) and "Vehaya he'akov lemishor" (1911) are all attested to in many other sources of the period. What "Rabbi Binyomin" seems to fail to comprehend, however, is the complex seriousness of the young writer's aspirations.

When Agnon protested against Mendele, he was not merely seeking a more adequate linguistic medium to express psychological realism. Mendele's Hebrew style was the quintessence of the Europeanization of Hebrew prose. Despite Mendele's richly textured Jewish ambiance and his dazzling mastery of Hebrew sources, his syntax and modes of narration are those one would recognize in the great nineteenth century European authors. As a dedicated proponent of *Haskalah*, his use of this Europeanized style was, in itself, an ideological statement. In rebelling against Mendele, Agnon was not only exploring new modes of expression; he was making a statement about Jewish history.

We should not forget where and when he said what he said and wrote what he wrote. This was Jaffa of the Second Aliyah, the concrete embodiment of secular Zionist aspirations, young pioneers returning to the ancestral homeland to rebuild it from its desolation. Agnon was an anomaly in Jaffa. He was not a pioneer; he never worked on the soil; he came from the Galician province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, not from Russia, the homeland of most pioneers in Jaffa. To fix Agnon's ideological position among his contemporaries of the Second Aliyah, it is interesting to compare him to the two other figures prominent in "Rabbi Binyomin's" essay: "Rabbi Binyomin" himself and the writer, Yosef Hayyim Brenner. "Rabbi Binyomin," also a Galician, had no doubts about the viability of the Zionist enterprise and was busily engaged in a variety of colonizing activities. Brenner, on the other hand, was the paragon doubter, but nonetheless chose to immerse himself in a host of political and literary activities, in addition to writing his own fiction. Agnon's stance was marginal, fraught with ambiguities, and led to no easily definable commitment. His choice of both style and theme in this period was crucial for the development of his career and reveals much about his attitude towards Jewish history. What interests me, therefore, in this paper, is the ideological implications of the choice of style.

The question of style emerges not only when we study a text, but even when we address any of the large questions seriously. When asked to identify what is Agnon's forte as a writer of fiction, we are usually hard pressed. No careful reader would claim that Agnon's plots are particularly inventive, or that his characters are well-drawn and memorable.

And while his psychological remarks are often insightful and his landscapes evocative, these narrative features would never suffice to justify the unflagging critical attention he has enjoyed. Agnon's oblique but demonstrably pervasive preoccupation with some of the more profound issues of modern Jewish life or his deft weaving of a texture of polysemous motifs generate a textual density that sustains repeated close reading. The latter, in turn, alerts the reader to what is specifically, unmistakably Agnonic: the playful dialogue the author conducts with his implicit reader through a carefully modulated narrative voice that speaks in an ingenious style, which sounds like speech, but is unlike any other discourse in modern Hebrew fiction.

Agnon's style has, to be sure, inspired numerous studies, mostly tracing his sources in Biblical or post-Biblical literature. Frequently, this style is characterized as *midrashic*, a term so vague and varied in common parlance as to be useless. One can, of course, identify the unmistakable Agnonic style as being derived from late-rabbinic models, that is, texts of the past three centuries deriving from rabbinic or Hasidic milieu in Eastern Europe, where the authors spoke Yiddish that left its imprint on their Hebrew diction and syntax. Rather than trace sources, I would ask: Why did Agnon choose to adopt and cultivate this peculiar style which must convey to the sensitive Hebrew reader the connotations of the world of pious East European Jews? This question is, unfortunately, rarely raised today, for not only is Agnon's style routinely recognized as that of pious writers, but many readers learn the stylistic norms of East European Jewry primarily through Agnon's writing. This style, however, was not the only one available to Agnon when he first adopted it in 1911, after several years of experimentation with other styles, but actually represents a radical departure from the developing norms of Hebrew style at that time. When we remember that such powerful models as Mendele, Brenner, Bialik, or Berdyczewski were still alive and publishing, and that the use of Hebrew, or even a particular type of Hebrew, was an ideological statement, Agnon's choice begins to assume its proper historical dimensions.

Both individual Agnonic texts and the totality of his fictional works (and, all the more so, his anthologies of traditional materials having to do with such matters as *The Days of Awe*, or *the Revelation at Sinai*, or *Hasidic Tales*) are evidence of his *negotiations* with Jewish history. *Negotiation* and *appropriation* are two of the more colorful terms that have insinuated themselves into our critical vocabulary in the past decade and merit usage only upon examination and qualification. Usually they

are employed when one wants to describe an author's use of material taken from earlier authors. By talking of *negotiation* or *appropriation* we both restore the author and treat him as an active agent rather than a passive receptor of *influences*. Despite their often mindless fadishness, these terms represent a conceptual gain. This gain, however, might be offset by the potential metaphorical obfuscation: because they derive from the world of property acquisition or capital exchange, they evoke overtones of their origins. I prefer *negotiation* to *appropriation* since the latter implies an act of domination, even violence in which the object appropriated, here the text, is inert and cannot possibly resist or shape the act of appropriation. *Negotiation*, on the other hand, assumes that there is an active, on-going process in which the other side is active. It forces us to remember what we often forget—that all texts have to be activated by a reader. The process of negotiation, then, is dynamic and complex. The author—Agnon, for instance—*negotiates* with a text that he has already activated by his reading. What makes the Agnonic text so intriguing is that a careful reading brings you to the conclusion that the author is supremely conscious of his negotiations with the text and, inasmuch as these are historical Jewish texts, the concrete manifestations of what we ordinarily call Jewish history; he is negotiating with Jewish history.

For the reader, then, reading an Agnonic text is also a “negotiation with Jewish history,” and should be perceived as such. And since Agnon is so patently conscious of the historical contexts of his linguistic sources and fictive situations, we should also strive to acquire some expertise in these historical contexts. An awareness of this interpretive requirement should free us of some of the subjectivism that is an inevitable component of the interpretive act. In dealing with the text of an author so linguistically manipulative as Agnon, such awareness and added historical controls are not only advisable—they are imperative. Aside from the author's well-known habit of revising his texts for successive publications, we are forced to read his fictions through the voice of one of the most conflicted yet controlled narrative voices any modern writer has created. We should realize that almost every story has more than one published version, that the narrator's perspective—and personality—might change from work to work, from version to version of the same work, and even from phrase to phrase in the same sentence.

In suggesting that Agnon “negotiates with Jewish history,” we do not imply that Agnon tries to render faithful representations of specific moments in Jewish history. The contrary is true; he was too shrewd a writer to succumb to that temptation. His writing career, we should

remember, embraced one of the most turbulent centuries in Jewish history. To have lived through that period in some of the most important centers of Jewish historical experience: Galicia, Jerusalem, Germany, and to survive it as a writer in control of his materials is, in itself, a tour de force of the human imagination. I would argue that Agnon succeeded in doing so precisely because he fashioned a mode of narrative discourse that was not based on the norms of Hebrew discourse that we usually associate with the regeneration of modern Hebrew literature. These norms, to be sure, could not be fashioned after Hebrew speech norms at the beginning of this century, because few people spoke Hebrew then, even in *Eretz Yisrael* of the Second Aliyah. Since, however, Hebrew was in an advanced stage of *revival* and had already established a viable modern literary tradition by 1905, there were what one might call evolving *quasi-speech* norms, and the major Hebrew prose-writers strived to shape and/or approach those norms. In general, Hebrew writers from the last decade of the nineteenth century on linked Hebrew with the national revival movement and, specifically, the creation of a Hebrew community in Palestine. Agnon, on the contrary, persisted in refining his highly literary style which enabled him to keep his distance from the worlds of experience that he wished to describe, to recast in his own distinctive language. Until we realize that this manneristic style is both a resistance to the hegemony of a ruling culture and a device for containing the centrifugal, contradictory sentiments of the modernist sensibility, we will not fashion an adequate interpretive control.

In order to assess the import of Agnon's negotiation with Jewish history, I shall examine one of the stereotypes of Agnon research, the comparison drawn between his writings and those of Kafka. Since I have dealt with aspects of this comparison elsewhere and for different purposes, I shall refer to my previous research on this topic to illustrate my argument.³

Agnon's name was first connected with Kafka in the early 1930s. In 1931, Agnon published the first four volumes of the *Berlin Edition* of his collected works and thereby solidified his reputation as a modern version of the traditional teller of Jewish pious tales. In late 1932, he startled his readers by publishing a new cluster of five stories, titled enigmatically *Sefer ha-ma'asim* (The book of deeds). Most readers found them impenetrable since they suspended the realistic canons of time, space, and causality in ways that went far beyond even his most fantastic quasi-Hasidic tales. Several critics who knew both German literature well and the extent of Agnon's library suggested that he had been reading

Kafka. Though my recent studies have convinced me that the picture was much more complex, that the text behind *Sefer ha-ma'asim* is probably Freud's *Traumdeutung* (Interpretation of Dreams) rather than Kafka's stories, the Kafka suggestion was plausible.⁴

Kafka was, of course, not a well-known writer in the early 1930s, certainly not the oft-cited proof-text he is today, but the attribution was logical, given the literary situation in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. By the late 1920s and early 1930s there had formed in those two cities a colony of sophisticated German-reading emigrés, many from Berlin and Prague, some of them Kafka's close associates. Hugo Bergmann, for instance, came in 1920 and was prominent in cultural circles; Leo Hermann, the editor of *Selbstwehr*, the Zionist newspaper published in Prague and which Kafka read faithfully, migrated in 1926. Among the refugees who came after the *Anschluss* and *Kristallnacht*, were Max Brod, Kafka's friend and literary executor (1939), and the two Weltsches, Felix and Robert (1940). Together with such luminaries as Gershon Scholem who came in 1923 and Martin Buber, who came in 1933—and, to be sure, many other less known intellectuals—they formed one of the first centers of Kafkaists. Their personal libraries contained at least the three novels, published in the late 1920s, some of the short stories, and, if they left after the *Anschluss* or *Kristallnacht*, the first edition of *Gesammelte Werke*, 1936–37. To be sure, those libraries contained many other treasures, such as the *Gesammelte Werke* of Sigmund Freud.

Agnon, though an *Ostjude*, was part of these circles since he had spent 11 years from 1913 to 1924 in Germany, was an Austrian citizen because he came from Galicia, and had shrewdly capitalized on the romanticization of the *Ostjude* which began to surface in Germany in the first decade of this century. While Agnon protested that he had never read Kafka except for “Der Verwandlung” (Metamorphosis), and that his wife read these works, he probably knew more than a little of Kafka and Freud since his wife would read to him from these two writers in the 1930s.

When one observes both Agnon and Kafka from the perspective of general history, the comparison is far from gratuitous: both were born in the 1880s (Kafka in 1883; Agnon in 1888) and reared in the homes of relatively successful businessmen, both in marketing, in the last decades of the Habsburg Empire. While Kafka's Prague was far more westernized than Agnon's Buczacz, connections of the latter with Lemberg and Vienna were well established; the latest newspapers were available and political life was intense. If one were to compare the news of the Jewish

world published in *Selbstwehr*, the Zionist weekly whose centrality in Kafka's life has been well established by Hartmut Binder, with the Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers which Agnon was reading (and in which he published) one finds a remarkable commonality of content and concern: reports of Zionist activities, the settlement of Palestine, anti-Semitism as in reports of pogroms in Russia, blood libels throughout all of Eastern Europe, and, between 1911–13, the Beilis Trial which reopened the festering wounds of the Dreyfus Affair. The improved communications available with the building of the railroads and the telegraph contributed mightily to the formation of an international sense of Jewish solidarity: the Kishinev pogrom (1903) or the death of Herzl (1904), for instance, were widely covered and the news was immediately available in Jewish homes everywhere.

During Agnon's stay in Germany between 1913 and 1924, mostly in Berlin, but also in Leipzig, Munich, Frankfurt, and Bad-Homburg, the intellectual circles of our two writers actually intersected in some places. Agnon probably read "Der Verwandlung" (Metamorphosis) during this period and it is inconceivable that Kafka did not come across the name of Agnon since the latter was very popular in the circles of German Jews who were Zionists and disposed to harbor a strange nostalgia for anything that smacked of *Ostjudentum*, as manifested in Buber's *Der Jude*, which certainly reached Kafka, who published in it "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" (A Report for an Academy) in 1917. Agnon published six stories in *Der Jude* between 1917 and 1924, several translated from the Hebrew manuscript by Gershon Scholem and one, "Agadat ha-sofer" ("Die Erzählung vom Toraschreiber" in its German translation)⁵ appeared in the same volume, though not in the same issue, as Kafka's "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie." Agnon also published stories in three anthologies which were very popular in the same circles: *Chad Gadja: Das Pesachbuch*, ed. Hugo Hermann (Berlin, 1914); *Treue: Eine Jüdisches Sammelschrift*, ed. Leo Hermann (Berlin, 1915); *Das Buch von den Polnischen Juden*, ed. S.J. Agnon and A. Eliasberg (Berlin, 1916).

The grounds for comparison between Kafka and Agnon are historically attested. We should not, however, rush into the facile comparisons that usually assert that Kafka *influenced* Agnon because some of his most significant works were published in German in 1912–14 and Agnon spent the years between 1913 and 1924, in a German-speaking environment. Agnon had, in fact, written a story in Yiddish in 1907 with the intriguing name "Toyten-Tants" which manifested many of the calculated indeterminacies of Kafka's mature style—and this before Kafka had published

anything. Both writers had read widely in neo-Romantic German and Scandinavian authors; both had read and admired Dostoyevski and Flaubert. While grounds for comparison exist, historical research suggests that we should avoid misleading and simplistic notions of *influence*. There are, to be sure, major differences between these two writers, as there are between any two writers. The major difference in their backgrounds was their mastery of the texts and texture of Eastern European Jewish life. In this crucial area, Agnon was the prodigiously erudite insider while Kafka was the sympathetic, perceptive, outsider. The difference, we shall demonstrate, manifests itself most sharply in their attitude towards language.

This essential difference did not seem to trouble many critics, even the prestigious Hebrew critic, Baruch Kurzweil—also a Prague Jew. In many articles and books published in Israel, Kurzweil argued that under the deceptively pious surface of Agnon's prose lurk serious religious doubts. He compared Agnon repeatedly to other modern writers such as Kafka, Musil, and Joyce; more than any other student of Agnon's prose, he disabused the Hebrew reader of the naive view of Agnon which prevailed through the 1940s. Kurzweil correctly noted the obvious fact that while Kafka was only marginal to the Jewish tradition, Agnon was fully in the tradition—despite all his doubts. And yet, by slighting the differences in attitude towards language—and their implications—Kurzweil essentially constricted and subverted the grounds for comparison. Furthermore, his critical perspective was usually theologically oriented and deliberately avoided literary history.

Following Kurzweil, many critics have offered lavish comparisons between Kafka and Agnon. We should, however, establish some guidelines for research in this area by defining what is possible and productive. What, we should ask, are the perimeters of our investigation? Do we compare—or contrast—all of Agnon with all of Kafka? Obviously this is impossible because much of Agnon bears no resemblance whatsoever to Kafka's normative mode of expression. Even if we were to go beyond the twenty-odd stories of *Sefer ha-ma'asim* (ordinarily recognized as *Kafkaesque*, though my recent research indicates that it is more Freud than Kafka) to include such formidable pieces as "Shevu'at emunim" (The betrothed), "Ido ve-'Einam" (Ido and Enam), "Ad 'olam" (Forevermore), "Hadam ve-khiseh" (The stool and the throne), and the "Kelev meshuga" (Mad dog) portions of the novel *Temol Shilshom* (Only yesterday) altogether some 700 pages of dense fiction, we would still be left with several thousand pages of stories, novels, quasi-historical compilations of

tales, collections of rewritten customs interlarded with anecdotes, eulogies, commemorative pieces, and so on. When we speak of Agnon's "resemblance" to Kafka, we are actually referring to about ten percent of the former's work.

To focus on the problem of style-choice and its implication we turn to two stories, one by each writer, both first published in 1912—not that these stories are thematically related, but that each, in its own way, was crucial in the artistic development of the author: Agnon's "Vehaya he'akov le-mishor," (And the crooked shall become straight), and Kafka's "Das Urteil" (The judgment). In each case, the story represents a *breakthrough*—to use Politzer's term concerning Kafka—a breakthrough from fragments and experimentation to a sudden mastery involving decisions regarding stylistic and thematic features which subsequently mark the author's work for the rest of his career.

Kafka's "Das Urteil," written during the night of September 22–23, 1912, deals with the clash between a son, Georg Bendemann, and his seemingly ailing, aged father, who, by the end of the story, condemns his son to death by drowning. Bound by this injunction or command (*Urteil*), Georg jumps off the bridge near their apartment. In this story we already find the seemingly lucid sentence which, upon examination, is often indeterminate; the obsession with guilt and trials; the subject-object inversion; the varied and often contradictory identifications; and the unique fusion of disparate experiences—all characteristic features of Kafka's art.

Here as in some of Kafka's other well integrated stories, a central, generalized concept is presented as the title, for example "The Judgment" or "Metamorphosis" and the narrative is a taut examination of the term, situation by situation. The term may have several mutually contradictory meanings and the story is then a narrative concretization of the frustrating yet exhilarating complexities of language. Elsewhere,⁶ I have traced the term *Urteil* to both the Jewish High Holiday Prayer Book and the famous Beilis Trial (1911–13). Echoes of the Rosh HaShanah or Yom Kippur service illuminate the process of judgment, the figure of the father or of all systems of authority which, by their very nature, must fail, despite their oppressiveness. Where the term *Urteil* appears in the service, it is attributed to the divinity envisaged as a domineering king and judge of the world, the source of all authority and thus of guilt, too. Muffled echoes of the Beilis Trial can be found in the text: the friend in Russia, the scene of an overturned shop, the priest raising his hand, the obsession with unmotivated guilt. Given Kafka's family

background and his recently rekindled Jewish consciousness, an event so central to the consciousness of Prague Jewry as the Beilis Trial in Kiev could not have left him unaffected. Identification with Mendel Beilis, or even a remote though prolonged observation of his plight, could have provided Kafka with the validation of his own feelings of insecurity and loneliness, an objectification of his Oedipal torment, corroboration of his doubts about the validity and viability of language, and a moral justification for the bewildering dialectic between self-corrosive guilt and subtle imposture that marks so many of his protagonists.

In this story, as in most of his stories and novels, Kafka scrupulously suppresses any reference to specific persons, places, or events. When a specific place is named, Russia, for instance, it is not as a realistic item, but as a symbolic detail away from the presence of the protagonist. The German also avoids reference to recognizable literary texts; it evokes no historical echoes. This *clean* style is the product of deliberate artistic choices: the tight, Flaubertian technique which leaves nothing to chance; the plot strategies that take the reader from an apparently bourgeois setting into the abyss lurking beneath it; in all, a departure from the limitations of realistic prose narrative.

Agnon, in writing “Vehaya he’akov lemishor” also made several decisions concerning his craft that determined the direction of his writing for the rest of his long career. Though six years younger than Kafka during the writing of this crucial story, he had already published about seventy pieces in Hebrew and in Yiddish, both in Buczacz and Jaffa. Most of these were, to be sure, embarrassingly clumsy and were published only because the editor of a provincial newspaper often has to fill space. Those published in Jaffa attest to experiments in more serious writing, usually macabre, neo-romantic tales of frustrated love, bizarre deaths, strange women—all conveyed in an agitated, often lush Hebrew prose style. Agnon, himself, obviously realized that this was not the medium he was seeking since, after the success of “Vehaya he’akov lemishor,” he scrapped most of what he had previously written and either rewrote or totally discarded every line he had published. Few of these seventy items were ever republished in the many collections of his works.

Instead of paring down contemporary prose style to the threshold of meaning as Kafka would do, Agnon adopted the late rabbinic style his grandfather might have used, but kept it under scrupulously tight control. The lexical, morphological, and phrase syntax are clearly late rabbinic. The sentence, however, is an ingenious fusion of the modern and the traditional: while carefully measured and modern in its stratagems,

it nevertheless echoes the syntax of more folkish genres, the Hasidic tale for instance. The Hebrew reader cannot escape the fusion of these two registers, the traditional and the modern. In that Agnon deliberately shaped this style after experimenting with other styles prevalent in his youth and after the massive efforts by Mendele Mokher Seforim to Europeanize Hebrew prose, his choice of a style, which was historically regressive in certain aspects, implies a deliberate literary and ideological position. In that no Hebrew writer can escape consciousness of the various historical strata of the Hebrew language that are present and meaningful in modern Hebrew prose, linguistic choice involves some sort of attitude towards specific periods in Jewish history and what they mean in the modern period. For instance: the choice of a biblicalizing style by *Haskalah* writers implied a revolt against rabbinical norms while the choice of a composite classical rabbinic fused with biblical style by Mendele implied a distancing from *Haskalah* norms. Agnon, whose knowledge of Hebrew of all periods was prodigious, was obviously conscious of the historical provenance and implication of any phrase or syntactical structure he might use. The *negotiation* with Jewish history is obvious in every line. Agnon could thus generate the tension he sought between historical linguistic resonance (so important in an ancient, text-oriented culture), and a controlled reticence that often conceals more than it tells. The sensitive reader is thus forced to share the implied author's ambivalence about the world he has chosen to describe.

The technique worked wonders even in the first story in which it was used: "Vehaya he 'akov lemishor." The author faced a crucial choice in writing this story: in the society described, mid-nineteenth century Galicia, the norms of traditional piety and the bourgeois ethic are at odds. The hero, Menashe Hayyim, a pious shopkeeper of some means, is forced into bankruptcy by a new competitor. To recoup his capital, he reluctantly takes to the road as an itinerant beggar armed with a letter of recommendation certifying his identity, his former position in society, and his rectitude. This seemingly bizarre technique for recovering lost capital was not unheard of in earlier centuries, but had become the butt of satire by the nineteenth century. Begging for funds even for acceptable charities like family support and dowries for indigent brides were stock subjects of satire in the works of such seminal authors as Mendele. Agnon wrote his story against the background of Mendele's works, which had been published in a three volume edition the previous year. Agnon's story is thus a deliberate deviation from Mendele's narrative technique: it is more attentive to psychological realism or to bourgeois attitudes, and

strives to achieve effects which are less formally rabbinic, less balanced in their syntax. By refusing to avoid both late-rabbinic or Hasidic locutions and Yiddish speech patterns, he shaped an ambiguous, flexible style which does not let the reader know exactly what the author thinks about Menashe Hayyim's beggary, which is kept in the background while the hero's reactions to situations are foregrounded. With this style Agnon could fuse the pious with the bourgeois and neutralize the satirical Mendeleian bite.

Since Menashe Hayyim is conceived as a person and not a type, he can lose both status and identity, themes Agnon learned from his reading in European literature. The hero succumbs to temptation once he has recouped some of his money and sells his letter to another beggar. As one might anticipate, he then loses his money and all his possessions and must return to the road to beg, sans letter of recommendation. The beggar who bought the letter dies naturally and is buried as Menashe Hayyim: the latter's wife, now a widow, remarries and bears children which she could not do before when married to Menashe Hayyim. When the hero finally returns home, he finds his wife both married and a mother.

Here, too, Agnon dwells upon the conflict inherent in the situation: according to Jewish law, Menashe Hayyim should reveal that he is alive, thus embarrassing his wife and condemning her child to bastardry; but since he loves his wife, a bourgeois-romantic sentiment, he leaves town beset by the guilt of his concealment. He spends the last days of his life living in a cemetery where, by chance, he finds the cemetery guard inscribing his name on a handsome gravestone that his wife, thinking that the beggar carrying the letter was indeed her husband, had ordered to memorialize him. Several days later, happy in the thought that his wife still loved him and that he had resisted the temptation to reveal the truth, thereby ruining her life, Menashe Hayyim dies and the guard, who knew the story, places over his grave the stone ordered by his wife for the beggar's grave that she thought was his.

Even in bald plot outline, this novella does not sound like the pious tale it was taken to be by most critics for over thirty years: the quasi-rabbinic style, the pious milieu succeeded in deflecting the reader from such topoi obvious today as the loss of identity and the descent into hell, let alone the ambiguous ending in the graveyard or the hero's impotence. Kurzweil noticed in the early 1950s that there are, indeed, many discordant elements in the story, but following his theological bias, he read the story and much of modern Hebrew literature as a literary manifestation

of secularism. The story, for him, implies an accusation against the cruelty of God who lets the hero descend into a world of chaos for no glaring sin, if any at all. The hero is forced to leave his home and wife, to depart on a journey from which there is no return, since his return can be effected only by a miracle. But there are no miracles today.

Some fifteen years later I argued that Kurzweil did not address himself to the totality of the story, to the title which—taken from Isaiah 40—implies that “the crooked is made straight” and to the ending, which seems to vindicate the hero and restores the reader’s confidence in the possibility of justice in this world. Menashe Hayyim does die happy in the knowledge that he has withstood temptation (to reveal his true identity: that he was still alive) and has been rewarded with the two gifts most important to him, after he had despaired of ever recouping his fortune and his status: assurance of his wife’s continuing love for him, and confidence that he would have his posterity even if it were merely his name on a tombstone.

More important, Kurzweil, like most critics, has not come to grips with the implications of Agnon’s choice of this peculiar style, with what I call his *negotiation* with Jewish history. If we consider the mode of production crucial for an interpretation of the work of art, we must account for this choice which changed the direction of his artistic enterprise. After four years of experimentation in a neoromantic style with themes taken from the world of Jaffa where he lived, he abandoned both this stylistic and thematic course. He obviously realized that the neoromantic direction did not afford him the opportunities to confront the cultural and psychological problems that possessed him or to exploit his prodigious knowledge of Hebrew. Ultimately, these Jaffa stories were embarrassingly self-indulgent, even frivolous, and remained so unless recast in his new style. (Many, as I have said, were simply discarded.)

Here, the contrast with Kafka is instructive. Kafka selected situations that were to him either intolerable, or absurd, or comically grotesque, and struggled to fashion an unmediated linguistic medium, contemporary yet timeless, concrete yet constantly plumbing the depths of human consciousness. Agnon’s style, beginning with “Vehaya he ‘akov lemishor,” immediately directs the reader to a world of texts and textuality, a specific textuality at that, one that embodies in all its features a traditional, recognizable milieu. No competent reader of Hebrew could conceivably miss the multifarious implications of this style.

Realizing he could never fashion a neutral text, free of referentiality to previous texts—for such is the nature of the Hebrew language in the

beginning of the century and, to a lesser degree, even today—Agnon fashioned an artful pastiche of an older style so convincing that it took most readers some thirty years to realize that under the *pious* text of the novella lay a subtext which qualified, ironized, or even subverted the text. The seemingly *pious* text can thus be used for a variety of purposes: as a mask hiding or modifying the author's bold or revelatory sentiments on religion or sensuality; or as a mediating barrier that allows the author to distance himself from too direct and immediate responses to the dynamic, demanding events of contemporary Jewish history. Without it, Agnon's *negotiation* with Jewish history would have been impossible since he, as a writer of fiction, would have been overwhelmed by the flood of events.

Though criticized for this style by such formidable figures as Berdyczewski and S. Tzemah, Agnon succeeded admirably in creating a voice that allows for a wide range of authorial attitudes towards the text and the situations created, a subtle modulation between authorial and narrative voice, hence the possibility of a variety of *unreliable narrators*. Applied to those stories that most closely resemble those of Kafka, the manneristic style adds another level of indeterminacy. If, furthermore, one were to speak of Kafka and Agnon in terms of self-referentiality and the concomitant *play* of signification, one could say that Kafka creates the space for play by precluding clear signification of the represented world, while Agnon creates space for play by precluding clear signification of the textual world. Again, it is the artist's deliberate choice of style that makes all the difference. Two narrative situations may be thematically identical, but if they are conveyed in radically different styles, their impact on the reader has to be radically different.

NOTES

1. The Hebrew author Yehoshua Radler-Feldman.
2. Yehosua Radler-Feldman, *Mishpehot soferim: partzufim* (Tel Aviv, 1960).
3. Some of the material in the following pages can be found in a different context in my article "The Kafka-Agnon Polarities," in *The Dove and the Mole (Interplay 5)*, ed. M. Lazar and R. Gottesman (Malibu, 1987), 151–160.
4. My remarks on Agnon's reading of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* can be found in my article "Agnon Encounters Freud" in this volume. Delivered in two conferences in Israel in 1988, these were the first specific connections between Agnon's writing and a text of Freud's.
5. "The Story of a Torah Scribe."
6. See my essay "The Beilis Trial in Literature: Notes on History and Fiction" in this volume.