

ROBERT ALTER

## THE GENIUS OF S. Y. AGNON

THE FLOURISHING OF a diversified secular literature in Hebrew during the last two hundred years is in its way as remarkable as any blossoming of garden spots on neglected desert soil in Israel. The pioneer farmers had at least the sand to start with, while the new Hebrew literature, from its inception during the Enlightenment until after the First World War, had no land, no secular literary tradition, not even a body of Hebrew-speaking readers, in which it could take root. And the society of Palestine and Israel, in constant transition during the last four decades, has scarcely given the Hebrew writer more solid ground on which to stand.

Quite understandably, readers of modern Hebrew literature are inclined to be defensive about it. In the rare cases when someone of real interest has appeared on the Hebrew literary scene, critics have pounced on any connections they could make with major European writers: comparison was a way of saying that one of the local products had arrived. Thus Mendele Mocher Seforim, whose vivid satirical portrayal of East European Jewry made him, toward the end of the last century, the first important Hebrew novelist, was tagged the Hebrew Cervantes—simply because he had committed the indiscretion of modeling one minor novel after *Don Quixote*. Y. H. Brenner, an intent, in-

trospective writer (and translator of *Crime and Punishment*) whose stories during the early years of this century repeatedly contemplated the alternatives of madness and suicide, was inevitably labeled the Hebrew Dostoevsky. (At about the same time in Yiddish literature, Sholom Aleichem was having his place fixed as the Jewish Mark Twain.) Shmuel Yosef Agnon has dominated Hebrew fiction now for more than half a century, and consequently he has been a favorite subject for these international comparisons. The diversity and complexity of his work has caused his name to be linked with more than one European writer.

Back before the outbreak of World War I, Martin Buber—who was to become Agnon's friend and his collaborator in research on Hasidic tales—described the young writer as "the Hebrew Homer of modern literature" after the appearance of Agnon's artistic folktale, "And the Crooked Will Be Straight." In the 30's, with the publication of *The Bridal Canopy*—a patchwork of stories with the travels of a Quixote-Sancho pair forming the cadre—Agnon inherited Mendele's place as the Hebrew Cervantes. It was clear that all this would not do. The Hebrew novelist might be certified with the stamp of ancient Greek and Renaissance Spanish art, but in order for him to have contemporary stature, some distinctively modern analogue had to be found, and the nightmarish expressionist stories that he began publishing in the 30's and continues to write today have invited the description of Agnon as the Hebrew Kafka. However commendable the enthusiasm behind these comparisons to great names in Western literature, the truth is that the qualities which

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raise any Hebrew writer above the usual second rank of his colleagues are not likely to be found in any such resemblances, but, on the contrary, in the characteristics unique to him as an individual artist, as a user of the Hebrew language, and as a Jew.

**I**NFLUENCES FROM the outside, of course, or even coincidental similarities with the outside, are not irrelevant to criticism. In Agnon's case, a collection of stories like his later *Book of Deeds*\* (from which two short pieces were translated for the October 1960 COMMENTARY) reflects certain affinities with Kafka so pronounced that they can hardly be overlooked. Agnon is generally very coy about the sources and intentions of his writings and is said to have denied having any knowledge of Kafka, though this seems highly improbable in a man who has been an avid lifelong reader of German literature. (There is even a personal link between Agnon and Kafka in Max Brod, Kafka's friend and biographer, who has been an acquaintance and admirer of the Hebrew author since the 20's.)

*The Book of Deeds*, in the manner of Kafka, introduces its readers to a dreamlike world where the ordinary laws of time and place, of logical sequence and causality, seem to be suspended. Although Agnon has little of the neurotic intensity that distinguishes Kafka's writing, he possesses something of the same sense of a world where terrible things are waiting to spring out from the shadows of experience. Also while Agnon rarely seeks the shocking visual effects one occasionally finds in Kafka, his Hebrew has much the same unexcited, deliberately restrained tone of narration as Kafka's German, and achieves a very convincing Kafkaesque *frisson*, often through the imagery of sounds. A good example is afforded in the story "A Whole Loaf"†:

Again the clock rang out. My ears ached with tiredness and the lamp smoked and a black stillness filled the room. In the midst of the silence, I heard the scraping of a key in the lock, like the sound of a nail being driven into flesh,

and I realized that they had locked me in and forgotten me.

Agnon seldom elaborates a detailed image of the action he describes, but his quiet, orderly, almost detached contemplation of horror creates a strange and disturbing effect by the very contrast between the manner and matter of narration. The same character who finds himself shut up for the night in an empty restaurant goes on to tell what happens after the final turn of the key in the lock.

I heard a kind of rustling and saw a rat that had jumped up on the table and was nibbling at the left-over bones. Now he's feeding on the bones, I told myself. Afterwards he'll chew up the tablecloth, then the chair I'm sitting on. Afterwards he'll start on me. First he'll chew up my shoes, then my socks, then my feet, then my calves, and finally the whole body. I fixed my eyes on the wall and saw the clock. I waited for it to ring again, hoping it would frighten away the rat before he got me. A cat appeared and I thought I was saved. But the rat ignored the cat and the cat ignored the rat. The two of them crouched there and gnawed away.

The narrator of this story, like most of the protagonists in both Agnon and Kafka, is a wholly passive figure, at the mercy of demonic forces that mock him or threaten to destroy him. And the Hebrew writer, like the German, is constantly concerned with the theme of judgment. His characters often find themselves peremptorily summoned before some sort of tribunal; their crucial experiences are set characteristically on the eve of the Jewish New Year or on the Day of Atonement, when Jews place themselves under the scrutiny of divine judgment. In all this nightmare world, moreover, Agnon's surrogates, like Kafka's, discover the greatest horror in the reality of their own selves. For example, Agnon's short novel *Till Now* (1953) is set in the Germany of World War I (where the author himself lived during this period), and examines the dislocating and dehumanizing effects of the war; however, the dramatic and moral interest of the book is characteristically built up around the private experience of the self:

I dreamt that a great war had come upon the world, and they called me up to fight. I swore a solemn vow to God that

\* The Hebrew title has a double meaning, and could also be translated as *The Book of Tales*.

† The translation here from the Hebrew is mine, as in all following passages.

if I returned from the war unharmed, whoever came out of my house to greet me when I returned I would offer up as a sacrifice. I returned to my house unharmed, and it was I myself who came out to greet me.

Agnon's earliest stories are largely artistic reworkings of themes drawn from folk tales. But one of the folk-tale themes that attracted him from the start was that of the fatal mistake and its inescapable consequences, one which also preoccupied Kafka. His first published story, "Mateless Souls" (1908), begins, significantly, with an image of disrupted moral order. God is described weaving a beautiful prayer shawl from the threads of loving-kindness in the actions of the people of Israel. But sometimes a mishap occurs: a thread is broken off, the fabric begins to unravel, evil winds pierce it and rip it to pieces. "At once men are seized by a feeling of shame and they know that they are naked"—these last words, of course, echo the description in Genesis of the shame of Adam and Eve. And though some of Agnon's early folk tales present Edens of ideal harmony and piety, his imagination is more usually drawn to situations where the serpent's counsel has been followed, and there is no way of revoking its disruptive and evil consequences. In "Mateless Souls" a father contracts the wrong marriage for his daughter; in the story "And the Crooked Shall Be Straight" a storekeeper squanders his family's savings; in "The Outcast" a proud aristocrat calls down a holy man's curse on his house—and in each case the protagonists are caught up in an irreversible stream of circumstances that carries them to their ruin. In his later work, Agnon no longer presents this situation in the traditional terms of inexorable fate, but he places his characters in the same predicament of being subject to inscrutable forces over which they have no control.

A similar kind of helplessness is discernible in the heroes of those later novels by Agnon which have realistic social backgrounds. Also reminiscent of Kafka is the passivity of his male figures in contrast to the domineering and sometimes demonic females who enter their lives. Herschel Horwitz, the hero of *A Simple Story*, a novel Agnon wrote in the 20's about a Galician town at the turn of the century, is controlled first by his

mother and then by the woman to whom he is married against his will. Yitzhak Kummer, the protagonist of *Not Long Ago* (1946), a novel set in Palestine in the years before the outbreak of World War I, is buffeted between two women—the blond Sonya in the new settlement at Jaffa and the dark-haired Rivka in Old Jerusalem. Manfred Herbst, the central figure in the unfinished novel *Shira* (chapters appeared from 1951 to 1954), is a university professor in the Jerusalem of the late 30's, a man habitually passive both in his career and in his private life. He allows himself to be seduced by the hard-mannered, sensual nurse, Shira, at the very moment when his wife is giving birth to their child in the hospital where Shira works.

VALID AS THESE points of comparison with Kafka may be, Agnon, the distinctive artist is, it need hardly be said, much more than a Hebrew Kafka. Even his "Kafkaesque" stories bear the unmistakable marks of Agnon's own special vision; in any case, they comprise only one segment of his varied literary production over the last fifty-three years. But beyond all similarities, while Kafka exemplifies the distress of rootlessness that has characterized so many Jews in modern times, Agnon's uniqueness derives from the fact that he is so deeply rooted in a tradition. Agnon is in many ways the most profoundly Jewish writer to have appeared in modern Hebrew literature, and it is in his role as heir to a Jewish religious and cultural heritage that his artistic distinctiveness is to be sought. During the same period when he was conceiving the first stories of *The Book of Deeds*, Agnon published a charming little anecdotal essay, "The Sense of Smell," which included a short section entitled "The Secret of Writing Stories." Here he discloses the religious impulse of his fiction:

Out of affection for our language and love of the holy, I burn midnight oil over the teachings of the Torah and deny myself food for the words of our sages that I may store them up within me to be ready upon my lips. If the Temple were standing, I would take my place on the platform with my fellow choristers [Agnon traces his ancestry to the tribe of Levi] and would recite each day the song

that the Levites used to say in the Holy Temple. But since the Temple is destroyed and we have neither Priests in their service nor Levites in their chorus and song, I devote myself to the Torah, the Prophets, the latter Scriptures, the Mishnah, Halachah and Aggadah, the Tosefta, rabbinical commentaries and textual glosses. When I look at their words and see that of all our precious possessions in ancient times only the memory is left us, I am filled with sorrow. And that sorrow makes my heart tremble. And from that trembling I write stories, like a man banished from his father's palace who builds himself a small shelter and sits there telling the glory of his ancestral home.

Another observation about Agnon that the passage suggests is the inborn need of a poet to sing, in one way or another, which has motivated him since boyhood. The years around the turn of the century, when the young Agnon was learning Talmud in the Galician town of Buczacz where he was born, were part of a period when one might occasionally discover a copy of Euclid or Spinoza hidden inside a yeshiva student's bulky Talmud folio. But if anything were found slipped in between the pages of the youthful Agnon's Aramaic text, it would probably have been a sample of his own Hebrew verse. Unlike the surreptitious pamphlets of mathematics and philosophy, his verses were directly and closely related to much of what was printed on the pages of the Talmud, and when Agnon left the *shtetl* to venture out into the world of belles-lettres, he did not leave the Talmud behind, as did his contemporaries from the *yeshivot* when they made their entrance into European culture.

AGNON HAS devoted his life to creative writing—and with a permanent annual stipend from his publishers, the Schocken House, he is probably the only Hebrew writer ever to make a comfortable living from his writing alone. But he has also devoted his life to the study of Torah. On Agnon's desk in his home in Talpiot, the quiet Jerusalem suburb where he has lived for over thirty years, one might conceivably find a copy of James Joyce (in translation) or Rilke, but one is more apt to see some yellowed, flaking volume that proves to be an obscure 8th-century homiletical com-

mentary on the Pentateuch, or a collection of Hasidic parables, or perhaps a late medieval mystical treatise. In this respect, Agnon continues the tradition of the illustrious rabbinic line from which he is descended, and possesses a voluminous knowledge of traditional Hebrew and Aramaic source materials—the Bible, with all its rabbinic commentaries, the Talmud, the Midrash, Maimonides and the medieval Jewish philosophers, the Cabbala, the literature of the *Musar* movement, and, of course, the literature of the Hasidic tradition of more modern times.

While all this Jewish erudition has served as an inexhaustible mine of materials—both verbal and conceptual—from which Agnon has fashioned his creative vision, the relation between Agnon the author and Agnon the learned and pious Jew is to some extent ambivalent. There are times when he looks ironically on his own role as writer (or *sofer*, which in traditional Hebrew meant Torah scribe, and in modern usage generally means author); a Jew, he implies, ought to be an inscriber of holy scrolls, not someone who simply tries to write pretty things. In at least two of his stories he attempts to resolve this conflict by imagining himself as a *sofer* in both senses of the world—a writer whose stories and novels form one long Torah scroll.

The image that Agnon draws of himself as the craftsman of a holy book in which the people will read and God's name will be sanctified, is instructive, but it is not an altogether faithful self-portrait. It is true, on the one hand, that Agnon's work often gives evidence of a writer who has a sense of himself not merely as the artist before his audience, but as the artist-member of a people standing before God. There are stories that he uses from beginning to end as vehicles for "telling the glory of his ancestral home." When he depicts the greatness of a Jewish past—which means for him the traces of God's working, or the lives of godly men, in the ancient or recent past—his role as artist does not differ substantially from that of the creative imaginations in the early Middle Ages that produced the Midrash, or of the half-forgotten medieval poets who produced the ornamental liturgical verse of the *Piyyutim*. But it is also true that a large part of Agnon's work is intensely

personal, even confessional, in nature. The *sofer* who has mastered the calligraphy of sacred scrolls is no less a modern writer struggling with his own individual problems and with his own needs for expression. The banished son attempting to recall the splendors of his father's house cannot shelter himself from the world around him with its visions of destruction and uprooting, its dream demons and their twisted Jephthah-vows.

Thus at times there is perceptible the tension between the artist and the traditionalist in Agnon; but what is most remarkable about him is the way he has absorbed Jewish tradition, made it part of himself in making himself part of it, so that he has been able to build upon it a distinctive and highly personal artistic vision. Agnon's creative adaptation of traditional materials can best be examined in terms of the language and the motifs and symbols he employs. At the same time, his use of language and symbol discloses the recurrent ideas and concerns of Jewish tradition that appear in his writing.

WHEN AGNON chose to reveal to his readers the secret of writing stories, he mentioned first his affection for language, and it is certainly true that his painstaking concern for words plays a large part in the originality of his art. During a conversation with Agnon last year in Jerusalem, I mentioned to him the often unpredictable struggle with the medium of words that Virginia Woolf speaks of in *A Writer's Diary*. Agnon nodded, then told me about a short story he had written over forty years ago called "The Outcast." It had begun, he explained, as a full-scale tetralogy, but the more he worked it, the more the scheme shrank, until he finished with just sixty pages of Hebrew print. "I couldn't carry out the original plan," Agnon concluded, "because at that time my language wasn't adequate for the task." If language in general tends to be a clumsy instrument for the demanding requirements of human expression, modern Hebrew, as a language that has barely advanced beyond the stage of its own rebirth, is clumsier than most. What Agnon has done through the years is to create a Hebrew of his own that has come to fit his particular needs of expression with extraordinary precision. It is about as different

from the Hebrew spoken in Israel today as Elizabethan English from modern colloquial American—though one is likely now to hear occasional archaic turns of speech among literate Israelis which, one suspects, have come straight out of Agnon.

In a satire written a few years ago on the politics and bureaucracy of the new state, Agnon apologized for not representing the speeches of the state's leaders in their own special shade of purple prose. "[Instead] I've put down their words in my own language, an easy and simple language, the language of the generations that came before us and of the generations that will come after us as well." Far from being a deliberately perverse literary anachronism, Agnon's older Hebrew comes largely from his desire to avoid the provincialism in time from which so much of modern culture—and particularly Israeli culture—suffers. Though he has fashioned his language from many sources, the Hebrew he writes has a predominantly medieval flavor, and is essentially the Hebrew of the Mishnah, and even more, of the Midrash.

The term "medieval" may give the wrong impression to an English reader because there is really no analogue among the Western languages to the body of Hebrew upon which Agnon draws. As one goes back in the history of English, for example, diction tends to become more elaborate and ornate until the Tudor period; before that, it begins to take on in most cases the wooden, rough-hewn appearance of a relatively undeveloped language. The Hebrew of the Midrash, on the other hand, does not suffer from either old-fashioned elaborateness or primitive crudeness. The style of this great medieval collection of homiletical and legendary variations on Biblical themes is a simple, evenly-controlled mode of diction (and consequently Agnon's own style can be deceptively "easy and simple"), but it possesses a peculiar lyric grace, and its flexibility of syntax and breadth of vocabulary make it capable of representing fine nuances of feeling.

Midrashic Hebrew is, moreover, much closer to the modern Hebrew reader than its fifteen-hundred-year history would suggest. The source books in which it is used have been traditionally studied from childhood on with the sort of application that

would make them as familiar to the cultivated reader of Hebrew today as, say, *Pilgrim's Progress* once was to English school-children. Agnon's Hebrew stands with the readers for whom it is intended on a footing of old and intimate acquaintance, in all its archaic accoutrement. It has a distinctive poetic charm that necessarily disappears in translation; and because of the deliberate simplicity of the style, Agnon in English is likely to look rather wan and anemic.

THROUGHOUT HIS long career, Agnon has had the perfectionist's passion for polishing and repolishing his style which is associated in European literature with figures like Flaubert and Joyce. Agnon may write a story, lock it up in a drawer, and let it sit for ten or fifteen years until he is ready, then take it out, rework it, and finally publish it. At present he has nearly four hundred pages of two different novels that have appeared in progress in various periodicals over the past ten years; there is no way of knowing whether he has actually finished either book or when he will decide to let any more chapters get into print. Today, at the age of seventy-two, he continues to follow an active work schedule, is still a vigorous experimenter, and even now he will on occasion make stylistic revisions of stories he published thirty years ago.

But Agnon is no more a Hebrew Flaubert than he is a Hebrew Kafka. In his own concern for language there is one major distinguishing element: the Hebrew he writes is for him not merely a language (*lashon*) but the Holy Language (*P'shon ha-kodesh*). He naturally connects affection for the language with love of the holy; for, like generations of Jews before him, Agnon regards Hebrew as the Jew's indispensable means of entrance into the sphere of sanctity. His stylistic perfectionism partly derives from his feeling that as a Hebrew writer he is a kind of guardian of sacred vessels who must protect them from every possible contamination. It is through the direct continuity which he preserves in his style with the Hebrew of the past that he is able to maintain a grip on the spiritual vision of the past. Even in the darkest corners of his nightmare world, the language he uses becomes a safeguard of sanity, a constant testimony of the continuing strength of traditional values.

In his last published volume of stories, there is a striking account of a father and daughter who are forced to flee their home after anonymous enemies have destroyed their house and all their possessions. The father asks the little daughter (who in Agnon's symbolic scheme represents the soul) if she knows what the Hebrew letters *aleph bet* spell. She answers correctly that they form the word *av* (father). The father then tells her: "You see, my darling, two little letters stand in the prayerbook as if they were all alone; they come together and make *av*. And not only these letters, but all the letters when they are joined make words, and the words form prayers, and the prayers rise up before our Father in heaven who gives ear and listens to the voice of our supplication." For Agnon this alphabet alone—the Hebrew of tradition in which he writes—is the alphabet of holiness. It was the instrument through which the sanctity of the past was expressed and preserved; it is what enables him to hold on to a sense of that sanctity and to recreate it in his writing, even when he is most intensely aware of the chaotic and threatening aspects of the world he lives in.

Together with the words of tradition, Agnon has adopted for his own. uses a wide variety of motifs and symbols from this religious—and fundamentally poetical—literature. In effect he has found in it the solution to a problem that has typically concerned modern writers beginning with Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce: the need for a living body of mythology from which the artist can draw symbols meaningful to his audience to use in his own work. Agnon discovered a virtually untapped reservoir of symbolic richness in Jewish tradition, and, most particularly, in the Midrash. His development of traditional motifs endows his vision with an unusual poetic coherence, even over the apparently ambling stretches of some of his longer novels. A novel by Agnon is likely to prove to be, among other things, an extended variation on several symbolic themes, frequently themes he has taken from the Midrash.

A well-known Midrashic legend, for example, represents the people of Israel in exile as a prince (that is, God's son) who has been transformed by sorcery into a dog and who must suffer in this state until a re-

deemer will restore him to his original regal figure. Agnon's novel, *Wayfarer Stopped for the Night* (1940), which deals with the physical and spiritual destruction of East European Jewry, elaborates on this theme with great effectiveness. At the very beginning of the book, the narrator sees a plaque upon which the name of a Polish king had been inscribed in gold; the plaque is now broken, the letters are tarnished, and blood-red weeds have sprung up over them. Everywhere the vestiges of majesty are trampled on. The inhabitants of the war-ruined Galician town in which the story takes place refuse to regard themselves as anything better than animals—and rather pitiful animals at that. "The greatest of all evils," reflects the narrator, "is when a prince forgets he is a prince." And so the theme is reiterated and developed throughout the novel.

To cite a somewhat different use of symbolic source material, the story called "The Orchestra," which appeared last year in COMMENTARY, achieves its poetic unity through the manipulation of contrasting imagery of light and darkness. Several key references (which someone reading the story in Hebrew would be more likely to notice) are from verses in Psalms: the associations made by the Psalmist of light-God-salvation and darkness-trouble-death are recalled at critical points. The little girl in the story has a name that means light, the old woman's name suggests darkness. As soon as the little girl leaves the narrator, the old lady approaches. It is quite probable that, in addition to the light-imagery from Psalms, Agnon had in mind the symbolic use of light in the lore of the Cabbala, where human existence is conceived as a struggle to redeem the scattered sparks of the broken divine effulgence from the envelopes of darkness in which they are imprisoned.

In some cases, Agnon's knowledge of Jewish tradition has served merely as a source for his own symbolic imagination, and he brings his final creative product very far indeed from its literary antecedents. The story "Forevermore"—which appears elsewhere in this issue—seems to reflect such a process in operation. The germinal idea for the story's symbolic use of the lepers is in all probability a passage in the Midrash Bereshith Rabba, commenting on the verse

from Psalms, "Make me not the reproach of the base." The Midrash explains the verse as a plea to God by the Jews that He keep the other peoples from singling them out in their exile with the reproach, "Are you not a nation of lepers?" But in the story Agnon develops an original and complete fantasy from the image of the Jews as a people of lepers. I say fantasy, because the writer has gone out of his way to stress the quality of bizarreness and in this way to remind us that the reality of the story is a product of the imagination. He achieves this effect through the wilfully bizarre details of the Book of Gumlidata, and, more generally, through the peculiar impression he creates by beginning all proper names in the story with one of two letters. The Hebrew consonants *ayin* and *gimel* are the first two letters of Agnon's own last name, so the exclusion of all names that begin with other letters is a means of asserting that the happenings of the story exist peculiarly within the domain of its author's imagination. But what is most remarkable about "Forevermore" is the way its central symbol embodies in a single image the two contradictory elements of a highly paradoxical attitude toward Judaism. On the one hand, the lepers are prisoners of a living death. Their parchment book that tells the glory and destruction of an ancient city is befouled by the suppurations of its diseased readers. Yet it is only among the lepers and from their book that Adiel Amzeh finds the truth.

IT IS INDICATIVE of Agnon's originality as an artist that he has drawn from so many sources and yet managed to avoid making his work into a literary pastiche. A sound creative insight led him to choose from the tradition what was most appropriate for his personal needs of expression. For example, in an autobiographical story entitled "The Kerchief," Agnon creates a memorable portrait of family love and moral coming of age by building on a single comment of Rashi's on a verse in the Book of Lamentations. The verse is, "How is she [Jerusalem] become as a widow!" Rashi points out that Scripture does not say "a widow," but "as a widow"—"like a woman whose husband has gone to some far-off place but with the intention of returning to her." The absence of the boy's father is identified with the absence of

God from the Land of Israel. The mother sits at the window waiting for her husband's return, like Jerusalem waiting for its redeemer, and the boy has childish imaginations about the advent of the Messiah. Every night he tries to fall asleep with one ear open in case the ram's horn of redemption should sound before morning. But the boy has to discover that a genuine sense of the Messiah's coming—like the feeling of the family when the father finally arrives home—is only to be had by learning to face the most repellent sufferings of human life in the unredeemed world.

When, by contrast, Agnon takes young love as his theme in "Nights"—his stay in Jaffa from 1908 to 1913 is the background for his story—he adopts a rich lyric prose filled with reminiscences of the language of the Song of Songs. This haunting love story is a kind of extended prose-poem, luxuriant with the floral imagery of the Bible's great love poem. Agnon can even adopt so unlikely a form as the moralistic parable and turn it to his own artistic purposes. One of the recurrent concerns of his writing is the struggle—and the general failure—of the individual conscience to carry out its own moral responsibilities. He dramatizes this struggle with great effectiveness in a parable called "The Garment"—the story of a tailor who postpones making a garment commissioned by a great lord, stains the fabric while eating at his worktable, and finally drowns when he tries to wash the ruined material in the river. "The lord has many garments and he can afford to do without one of them. But the tailor who spoiled the garment made with material from the lord's workshop—what will he answer and what will he say when they ask him where is the garment?" Agnon does with the parable what the great Hasidic teachers might have done if they had been masters of Hebrew prose.

**B**UT OF ALL his achievements in adapting the materials of Jewish tradition to his own means of expression, the most important has been his remarkable success in weaving the legendary tapestry of the medieval Midrash into the texture of the 20th-century world lived in and experienced by Shmuel Yosef Agnon. One significant instance of this process is his treatment of the

theme of the house. Perhaps the greatest single concern in Agnon's writings is the problem of modern man who, spiritually, finds himself with no place to live. The comment made by the hero of Agnon's short novel *Till Now* might serve as an epigraph for the author's collected works. "I'll tell you the story of a man who has neither house nor room, who left the place he did have and lost the one he found. And so he goes from one place to another, looking for a place for himself."

By a strange double coincidence, Agnon has had two experiences in his own life paradigmatic of the violent destruction of order which has been such an important element in the history of our times. In 1924, when the Hebrew writer was living in Hamburg, his house burned down, and everything he owned went up in the flames, including his library of four thousand books and the manuscript of an autobiographical novel (which he never attempted to begin again). The suddenness and totality of the loss shocked Agnon profoundly. Within five years, the same thing was to happen to him again. This time it was his home in Jerusalem that was ravaged, and the agents of destruction were the Arab rioters in the Palestine pogroms of 1929.

In any case, the typical subject for Agnon's stories since the 30's is that of the dispossessed—the physically, culturally, and most important, spiritually dispossessed. Typically, the enemy has destroyed a man's house. In one story we may encounter him on the road, running away. Or, in others, he may be on a bus or train or ship that will not take him where he wants to go. There are no vacancies when he looks for an apartment, or he is unable to find the address he wants, or the house is locked and he has no way of getting in. The house he once lived in—the solid, ordered structure of an older way of life—has been knocked to pieces, and he finds himself a radically displaced person in a world without homes.

This subject is hardly a unique one in 20th-century fiction, but Agnon's conception of the dispossessed is distinctive because it connects the image of homeless man with the complex of symbols and ideas bound up in the idea of *galut* (exile) enunciated in the literature of Jewish tradition. The Midrash characteristically portrays *galut* as the



banishing of a prince from his father's palace (the Land of Israel) to live in a series of makeshift huts. (For this reason Agnon, the would-have-been Levite, builds himself a "small shelter" to recall the glory of his father's house.) The Midrash intended to instill in those who studied it a deep realization that any house until the time of redemption was only a temporary and flimsy shelter. *Galut* is not simply a matter of geographical displacement. When the people of Israel went into exile, the Divine Presence was said to have gone into exile as well. The notion of *galut*, in other words, includes the idea of a whole world order out of kilter, with even God out of his appropriate place. Or as the Cabbalists poignantly put it, it was not Israel alone that was in *galut*, but the world was in *galut*, and the world had to be redeemed if Israel was to be redeemed.

The Midrash in this way gives Agnon not only the language and images with which to represent the state of homelessness of modern man, but also a way to interpret this distressing phenomenon. Jewish tradition always opposes to the hut of exile the image of the house that was, which is also the image of the house that will be; the dark reality of exile is confronted in the un-

swerving belief in a redemption to follow the exile. There are moments in Agnon's stories when his dispossessed protagonists seem on the point of being wholly submerged by the forces that threaten them, but, in general, what distinguishes Agnon from an uprooted Jew like Kafka is the fact that he can honestly (and convincingly) envisage a restoration of the shattered order, a rebuilding of the ruined house. Agnon in his writings has confronted the most disturbing aspects of the contemporary world, and he is too shrewd, too tough-minded an observer to be capable of deceiving himself about such matters. Yet by remaining constantly in touch—both in his art and in his private life—with the spiritual wholeness of the past, he has preserved the conviction that such wholeness of spirit is both indispensable to man and still possible for man to achieve. Agnon is able, then, to conclude his visions of disaster on a note of affirmation. It is not a loud or insistent note: it seems to waver somewhere between the reliance of faith and the devout hope of prayer. But the modest affirming voice has the ring of authenticity, and in these "war days," as Agnon often designates the last half-century, it is a rare and precious sound.