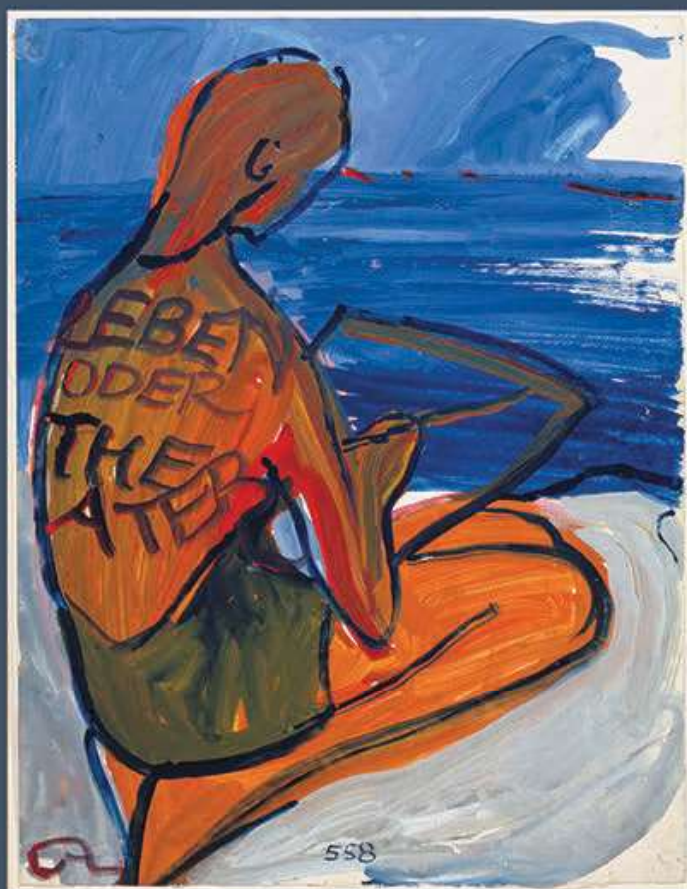




Consonanze 22

AUTOBIOGRAFIA EBRAICA: IDENTITÀ E NARRAZIONE

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«The Holy Letters Had Never Joined into Any Name as Mine» Notes on the Name of the Author in Agnon's Work¹

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1. Nomen est Omen

As the famous Latin proverb testifies, the correlation between characters' names and their nature, occupation, destiny or history is a literary trope very common in world-literature. It is known at least since the Bible. Abraham received his name because God is going to make him «the father of multitudes» or in Hebrew “av hamon goyim” (Gen. 17:5). Pharos' daughter's (surprisingly) good command of the language of the slaves, enabled her to name her Hebrew foundling, Moshe, saying, “I drew him out of the water (*meshitihu*)” (Ex. 2:10).² As one may presume this literary tool is only part of larger literary device. Proper names, i.e. not only persons' names but all names of specific objects such as places, plants, animals etc., can bear literary aesthetic value. That latter, broader phenomenon is also known as onomastics (literary onomastics). The narrower manifestation of that phenomenon, with which we started, i.e. the relationship between a name and its human bearers, might be dubbed as anthroponomastics or anthroponym.³

It is of no surprise that the use of that trope is very common in the work of Shmuel Yosef Agnon (Tchatchkes) (1888-1970), an author well-versed in both Jewish literature and thought, as well as in world-literature.⁴ In the following article we shall see several unique uses Agnon makes in that trope while trying to account for possible reasons lying at the core of his poetical worldview.

1. This article is an elaboration of ideas I have discussed earlier in different places: Hagbi 2009, 96-107, 140-144; Hagbi 2011, 73-85; Hagbi 2017. I also wish to thank Anna Linda Callow, Ayra Krijgsman and Claudia Rosenzweig for their help in preparing this article for publishing.

2. Sasson 2015.

3. In the 20th century the clever term “apronym” was coined to describe this sub-trope. Some attribute the welding of “patronym” and “apt” into “apronym” to the American journalist Franklyn P. Adams (1881-1960), see Britannica 2004; The Editors of the Encyclopædia Britannica, “Aponym.”; Saffire 1998.

4. For an elaborate study on that issue see: Hadad 2012.

2. Agnon and *Agunot*, between pseudo-nym and pseudo-*midrash*

S.Y. Agnon is one of the most important and influential writers of Modern Hebrew. His reputation among Hebrew readers gained worldwide acknowledgement when he received, together with Nelly Sachs, the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966. Born in Buczacz, Galicia, Austria-Hungary (now Buchach, Ukraine) to a family of Polish Jews, Agnon wrote at the very beginning of his youth (1903-1906), poems in both Yiddish and Hebrew.

Agnon immigrated to Turkish Palestine in 1908. In the same year he published, under the pseudonym Agnon, the story '*Agunot*' (1908), his first work to be brought out in Palestine, his new homeland. '*Agunot*' was published in four known versions. The first, as mentioned above, in Jaffa, 1908, in *Ha-'Omer*.⁵ Agnon attached great importance to '*Agunot*' not only because of its personal extra-literary circumstances, but because he (as well as others) regarded it to be his first serious literary achievement.⁶

The story opens in a pseudo-*midrash*,⁷ deeming the story to be a parable about the relationship between God and the people of Israel in the Diaspora:

IT IS SAID: A thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory, sits and weaves – strand on strand – a *tallit* all grace and all mercy, for the Congregation of Israel to deck herself in (...). But there are times – alas! - when some hindrance creeps up and snaps a thread in the loom. Then the *tallit* is damaged: evil spirits hover about it, enter into it, and tear it to shreds.⁸

The story then tells us about Sire Ahiezer who immigrated to Jerusalem, for religious spiritual reasons. He decided to marry off his only daughter Dinah and looked for a groom for her in one of the better *yeshiva*'s (Jewish academies for Talmudic learning) abroad. In the meanwhile, he built his "own" *yeshiva* and a synagogue. He hired a craftsman by the name Ben-Uri to build an artisanal Torah ark for the synagogue. Dinah, watching the artist while he works and sings, fell in love with him. After he finished his work, and the Torah ark was ready, Ben-Uri takes a walk in the garden to console the sadness any artist feels after completing a work of art. Dinah came to the room in which Ben-Uri had been working and saw only the ark leaning against the window. Frustrated she shoves out the ark through the open window. When the members of the community arrive in order to festively bring the marvelous work of art into the synagogue they discover it on the ground. Though «no part of it was broken» and no «corner of it was blemished»⁹ they conclude that the ark fell from the

5. Agnon 1908.

6. Laor 1998, 57-61.

7. Shaked 1986, 286-287.

8. Agnon 2008, 35.

9. *Ivi*, 39.

window because its creator is «an infamous sinner» who «called down the wrath of the heavens» and therefore their rabbi «immediately condemned it to banishment». ¹⁰ The ark was put in the «lumber room», Ben-Uri disappears and Dinah's groom, while the learned Ezekiel arrives to Jerusalem from Poland. On the day of her wedding Dinah confesses that she is to blame for the ark and the rabbi gives her the following midrashic exegesis, an invented original text *à la midrash*. First he starts with a citation from the Talmud and says that: «(O)ur sages of blessed memory tell us that when a person (*'adam*) takes a wife to himself, all his sins fall away» (*Yevamot* 63b). The rabbi goes on and tell her, using Agnon's own interpretation, that she should «notice that it was a “person” they said, not a “man”, and thence we gather that it was not man, the male, that was meant, but mankind in general, so that man and wife are one in this, that on the day of their marriage the Holy One, blessed be He, pardons their sins». ¹¹

Knowing now that there was no moral fault in Ben-Uri's ark, the rabbi commands to find it and bring it into the synagogue as it was meant to be. Nevertheless, the ark is not to be found. The relationship between Dinah and Ezekiel is not a happy one, «their bodies are close, but their hearts have been given to others». ¹² Ezekiel is in love with Freidele whom he left back home in Europe, and Dinah is in love with Ben-Uri the vanishing artist. The couple stands before the rabbi, now for their divorce. Agnon adds a remark he cites from the Talmud (*Gitin* 90b) saying that «Our sages of blessed memory said that when a man puts his first wife away from him, the very altars weep, but here the altars had dropped tears even as he took her to wife». ¹³ Short after «Sire Ahiezer left Jerusalem with his daughter (...) he went forth in shame (...) his house was deserted, the house of study stood desolate». ¹⁴ The rabbi who banned Ben-Uri's ark (and by extension, who banned Ben-Uri as well), the same rabbi who married and divorced Dinah and Ezekiel, wanders in the world seeking after Ben-Uri. In the last part, the latent mystical – mythic even – ingredient of the story becomes explicit. The rabbi wanders through time and space, not without reminding us of the wandering Jew.

At the present time it is said that he has been seen wandering about in the Holy Land. The world-wise cavil and quibble, and even – some of them – mock. But little children insist that at times, in the twilight, an old man hails them, and peering into their eyes drifts into the gathering dusk. And whoever has heard the tale here recounted surely knows that the man is that rabbi, he, and no other. ¹⁵

10. *Ivi*, 41.

11. *Ivi*, 42.

12. *Ivi*, 44.

13. *Ivi*, 46.

14. *Ivi*.

15. *Ivi*, 47.

Indeed, as Shaked is saying, Agnon doesn't «see himself as a transmitter of a great cultural lineage» but rather as one who belongs to a culture «which inherits a multi-textual tradition it can no longer carry on».¹⁶ We can summarize and say that Agnon uses *midrashic* language and rhetoric in at least three major ways. The first is a *direct citation* from classic Jewish sources (like the Talmud). The second is philosophizing in the old Jewish fashion, creating his own *midrashic* explanation. First he looks for textual difficulties. Above we saw how the rabbi - trying to appease Dinah's mind - wonders why the Talmud uses 'adam (person) and not 'ish (man). Agnon then offers a logical solution that would fit his narrative and the motives of his characters. It is, mind you, a legitimate solution that any accomplished Talmudic student would accept or at least will be required to respond to. Agnon's third use and most interesting of them all is the pseudo-*midrash*, the creating of a fable, a parable, as we saw at the beginning and at the end of the story. It is not constrained by common sense, what one may call western logic, but with textual formulas, vocabulary, imagery and rhetoric. The solemn tone renders it to be more than just a mere mocking pastiche.¹⁷

The story dons a sense of tragedy. All the major characters suffer but no one is to blame. Dinah's act of shoving the ark through the open window is an impulsive act and without any real malice. She even regrets and confesses it to the rabbi who dismisses her worries. We may say that the original "sin", the act that launches the plot and the characters towards their wretched fates is a masterwork made by the true artist. Ben-Uri could not help being who he is, an accomplished craftsman, consumed by his art, ignoring everything and everybody. Artists and writers stand at the center of many of Agnon's works. In one of the cases, as we shall observe below, besides the many other characteristics Agnon shares with one of "his" artists, they even bear the same first and middle names. The close relationship between Agnon and his artistic characters starts already here, in the story that marks the beginning of his career. If Agnon is intimately related to Ben-Uri, then Ben-Uri's unfortunate work of art might be compared with Agnon's own work, in this case, the very story 'Agunot.

The single word in the title of the story 'Agunot is the plural form of 'agunah. 'Agunah is a legal status in Jewish lore, indicating a wife whose husband has disappeared without ever being declared dead. Therefore, she cannot remarry – for a woman is not allowed to have two husbands – and waits alone for her vanished husband's never-materialized-return.¹⁸ The tragic fate of

16. Shaked 1986, 286.

17. Shaked 1973, 164.

18. The theme of 'agunot also stands at the center of one of Agnon's most important works, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*.

‘Agunot’s characters is part and parcel of the fate of the *‘agunah*, the Jewish abandoned wife. She as well, is punished for a crime she did not commit. Though none of the characters adhere to the legal criteria of the *‘agunut* status, all of them, all of their souls are abandoned. Soul, *neshamah* in Hebrew is a feminine noun, which might explain why Agnon chose *‘Agunot* as the title of his story and not *‘Agunim* (masculine plural), as the Hebrew grammar would dictate. Moreover, the first translation for *‘Agunot*, into German, published already in 1910 in Buber’s *Die Welt*, was done in Turkish Palestine under Agnon behest. Without its cultural context the Hebrew title is untranslatable. Agnon was the one to send the German version of his story to Buber under the title *Seelenverbannung*. Agnon, who was quite angry with the changes the editor of *Ha-Omer* made in his story,¹⁹ agreed to that drastic change in his title. *Seelenverbannung* (“Banished Souls”) fitted the poetical infrastructure of his story,²⁰ and the understanding of the souls/*Seelen* who are in a constant status of *‘agunut*, what makes them *‘agunot*, in the feminine plural form.

Thus, in Agnon’s hands, the state of *‘agunut* is not a legal status but an existential one. At the beginning of his career Agnon tried to distance himself from his pseudonym, by insisting that his name was Tchatchkes.²¹ Ben-Uri’s Torah ark, that beautiful piece of art, is an empty chest of a Torah role, a Torah role it will never hold. No divine Torah, no direct link to God, the Absolute, will be put there in spite of its artistic merits. *‘Agunot*, the story, accepts that incapacity, celebrates it even, when the author signed with a name he derived for himself from the title. Moreover, a few years later, in «a symbolic act (...) without parallel in Hebrew literature»,²² Agnon decides to adopt that pseudonym and to make it his legal name. By this action he let fiction take control over reality.

19. Shaked–Weiser 1978, 43.

20. Yaron *et alii*, 1994, 56.

21. Agnon still signed his letter to Buber from 1910 with Tchatchkes see as well Scholem 1966.

22. Shaked 1986, 287.

<p>The immediate acclaim <i>'Agunot</i> received together with the fact that Agnon was still unknown, caused someone in the small Yishuv (body of Jewish residents in Turkish Palestine) to claim the story for himself. Despite Agnon's objections at this stage to be called 'Agnon', he needed to assert his authorship. In the image here we see an ad, published in <i>Ha-Tzvi</i> (12-02-1909). The authors are demanding from a certain Mr. Shammi to cease from claiming he is the author of <i>'Agunot</i>, because they already «were noted from Jaffa that there a young man is to be found, S.Y. Agnon, and the <i>'Agunot</i> is his».²³</p>	<p>י"ד שבט עקרון אמת את דבריך! יודינו מר שמי! כפי שהודעתני כי העגונות של ש"י עגנון בהעמר ג' סרי עמך זה, סודיעים אנו לך, כי בימים האלה הודיעונו מיפו כי שם נמצא צעיר אחר ש"י עגנון והעגונות שלו הוא, ומפני כי כבר הלאתנו בהנזמיותך המצוינות, נפל ספק בלבנו ואיננו יודעים אם להימין או להשמאיל, ע"כ בבקשה סמך לאמת, את דבריך בדאר הצ"י. א. ב. ונ.</p>
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Moreover, as mentioned above Agnon eventually did identify himself with his new name. At least in two of his works, as many critics have shown (some even disliked),²⁴ he took another step in the use of his new name. Agnon "branded" his characters with his name, namely with its first two letters, the *'ayin* and *gimel*. All the characters of *Edo and Enam* and *Forever* start with these letters.²⁵

In other works Agnon continues to poetically integrate even his first and middle names. In *To This Day* he offers a unique use of the intimate relationship between the author, his characters, and the work of art.

3. The Author's name in *To This Day* and The Eternal Recurrence of Disaster

To This Day is Agnon's sixth novel (some might call it a novella) and the last to be published in his lifetime. *To This Day* – written after the Second World War

23. http://jpress.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI_heb/?action=tab&tab=browse&pub=HZV&_ga=2.17679547.328274712.1584827815-114294870.1582993797#panel=browse

24. Kurzweil 1976, 142.

25. Bahat claimed that it's more than a play on Agnon's name and that the very structure of *Edo and Enam* is connected to the use of the letters *'ayin* and *gimel* (1962, 169-170). Rozenzweig says something very similar in respect to *Forever* (Rozenzweig 1956, 83). More about that see for example: Barzel 1988, 60-61; Barzel 1998, 24.

– is set in Germany during the First World War. Bearing that fact in mind, one can easily detect some anachronistic references to the Second World War.²⁶

The narrator of this first-person work, who is also the protagonist, shares several biographical characteristics with S.Y. Agnon, the author. Both left Turkish Palestine, as mentioned above, and arrived to pre-First World War Germany. Both are caught there during the war. The same war causes both to wander all around Germany from one place to another in search of a place to reside in. The story starts when the narrator is making his way to a town called Grimma. He was invited by the widow of a certain Dr. Levi, who left her with two rooms filled with rare books. The narrator, like Agnon his creator, is also an author, and his great project is an encyclopedic book named *The History of Clothing*.²⁷ Wandering about in Germany, the narrator meets a childhood friend. This friend has a unique name, as the narrator tells us, this «friend had the same first and middle names that I did, which was uncommon [...]. Perhaps this explains the closeness we had always felt». ²⁸ When the narrator tells us that his friend's name is Shmuel Yosef Bach²⁹ we know for the first time that the names of the narrator are also Shmuel and Yosef. The scattered details connecting him to Agnon the author, are gathered here, only in the middle of the novel, and consciously bringing to the fore the intimate relationship between the novelist and his protagonist. It is based on an idea which came to him while he was in the war, lying in a trench: «I had an experience I never had before, yet which gave me a strong sense of *déjà vu*. A while later it happened again; this time I wasn't sure if it was the first time or not, because it both seemed that it was and that it wasn't. A few days later, it happened a third time. By now I was certain that the past was repeating itself – and not just once but over and over». This gives rise to the question what was the first event, was it «an illusion, or was it, too, a memory of something that happened and been forgotten? And if so, was I looking at an infinite regression?». And if one is still not convinced that Nietzsche comes to mind, Agnon almost forces us to make the connection: «If you'd like we can call my book *On The Repetition of Things*³⁰ rather than *The Biology of Events*. But now tell me what's happening with your universal history of clothing». ³¹ Before we will elaborate on the Nietzschean notion of the “repetition of things” lets us observe the last sentence. Here as well, Agnon takes no chances. It is very important for him that we shall understand that the narrator and Shmuel Yosef Bach are deeply connected. Not only do they share similar biographical details, a rare combination of the first and middle names,

26. See Weiss 2002.

27. Agnon 2009, 19-20.

28. *Ivi*, 91.

29. *Ivi*, 92.

30. On the connection of *The Biology of Events* and Nietzsche's concept of the “eternal recurrence” see (Ben-Dov 1997, 72-77).

31. Agnon 2009, 95 [translation slightly changed].

they are both also writing a book, two histories, history of clothing and history of events.

Dr. Mittel, the famous bibliographer, is one of the recurring characters in *To This Day*. After Dr. Mittel's son falls in the war as a German soldier, the narrator writes him a letter of condolence. In his response to the narrator, Dr. Mittel writes that a German (non-Jewish) intellectual, who lost his own son in the war, told him that «For this war (...) we can thank the German teacher who instilled in his pupils the absurd belief that they were the heirs of ancient Greece and Rome».³² Reading that and remembering that *To This Day* was written after the Second World War one thinks again about Nietzsche whose philosophy – especially because of the efforts of his sister and her husband – is associated with Nazi doctrines.

Ancient Greece was for Nietzsche, a professor for classic languages, much more than an academic occupation. One of Nietzsche's greatest problems is with post-Socratic philosophy, i.e., western philosophy of his time. He resists scientific – what he famously dubs, Apolonic – optimistic pretensions to know and understand. Nietzsche claims that Socrates is the first embodiment of «a profound *delusion*» that if one is to follow «the thread of causality» one can reach «down into the deepest abysses of being». Therefore, one is not only capable of «simply (...) understanding existence, but even of correcting it».³³ From that “thread of causality”, namely the rule of cause and effect, emanates the optimistic view of western thought that everything can be understood and if needed, even be corrected; good can be repeated and evil and bad outcomes might be prevented. The refutation of causality and the naive optimism of western science is an indispensable part of Nietzsche's philosophy. Once the linear thread of causes-and-effects is removed we understand how it is connected to Nietzsche's notion of circular time, of the repetition of things. As we recall, Shmuel Yosef Bach, the narrator's friend in *To This Day*, thought about the «repetition of things» while he was in the trenches of the First World War. Nietzsche wrote his own *Birth of Tragedy* as a soldier in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. The idea of the eternal recurrence came to Nietzsche as an epiphany,³⁴ not after a systematic philosophical deliberation. The manner in which Bach described the idea and the personal impact it has upon him, as we saw above, is almost an exact reformulation of Nietzsche's famous aphorism from *The Gay Science*:

This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspcakably

32. *Ivi*, 108 [translation slightly changed].

33. Nietzsche 1999, 73.

34. Reading Nietzsche's description from august 1881 of this epiphany, Danto characterized it as «the apparent impact of a mystical experience» (Danto 2005, 185).

small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence (...).³⁵

While Nietzsche talks about the repetition of joy as well as the repetition of pain, Agnon's perspective in *To This Day*, his latest novel, is that all what repeats itself is misery. Repetition and disaster go hand in hand. We saw how Dr. Mittle's mourning of his son is a duplication of the mourning of the German professor of his son, also a fallen German soldier. In the same scene Dr. Mittle tells the narrator about another intellectual mourning the death of his son. While the famous Joshua Heschel Shorr (1814-1895) was having his lunch he received the message about the death of his son. Though «he returned at once to his lunch, he never changed his menu or his clothes again for the rest of his life. Every day he ate the same meal and wore the same shirt and pants».³⁶

Another example of the repetition of disaster in *To This Day*, is the concept of war as a repetitive event. One of the characters, an old German gentleman talks «about the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, which was an idyll compared to the current war». This old veteran praises German science and scientists which are «responsible for many inventions now aiding Germany's war effort» and reminds the narrator that «they had played a crucial role back in 1870, too» for they knew all about «that country's secrets» and their work «was an invaluable guide for the German army, just as their knowledge of French history and culture helped Germany formulate the war claims to which the defeated were forced to agree».³⁷ Both the use of science to create war machines and the systematic looting of art, are traits of the Second World War, the mega-event shadowing *To This Day* in its absence.

Dr. Mittle describes the German people, and perhaps the human race, on his first meeting with the narrator «You say one war couldn't [destroy] a great nation? But one war leads to another. After a second war and a third...».³⁸ If the first war mentioned is the war of 1870-71, and the second is the First World War, the third will be then the Second World War, the unpronounced event.

We can now return to the name of the author and see the connection it has with the repetition of disaster. In his Nobel speech Agnon tells his listeners: «As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile».³⁹ Agnon is part of a catastrophe starting already by the destruction of the second temple. The repetition of that catastrophe is embodied in Jewish history in bursts of disasters, culminating in the Holocaust. In one of the scenes in *To This Day*, dogs are chasing the narrator. He is desperate, and in resignation

35. Nietzsche 2001, 194.

36. Agnon 2009, 108.

37. *Imi*, 63-64.

38. *Imi*, 36.

39. Agnon 1969, 614.

he utters «[while I'm d]riving away one pack of dogs, would not another pack of dogs shall come?».⁴⁰ There is no sense fighting the pack of dogs, any pack of dogs, with the violence and the danger they bring about. They are all part of the same eternal recurring event. Narrator and author as one are trapped in time, in a disastrous time.

We have in *To This Day* three authors sharing the same names. Shmuel Yosef Bach, the author of the repetition of events; Shmuel Yosef, the narrator and author of the history of clothing; Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the author of *To This Day*. All three are trying to make sense in the events, in their private and universal history. One is writing a genealogy of events, tracing the first event which we are doomed to repeat. The other, the narrator, is attempting to make sense of what is going on around him: «After that came still more (events, *me'ora'ot*), some belonging to the category of repetition and some whose purpose was known only to The Solver of All Mysteries. And with that, I believe, I've arranged things better than did my thoughts [...] which jumbled everything while forgetting nothing».⁴¹ Here is one of the places where the line between the narrator and his author is transgressed. The author, the third figure, is trying to find his own way in the “jumbled events” by writing the book we are reading. He finishes the book with the following words:

And because so many things befell me and I lived to tell about them all, I have called this book *To This Day* in the language of thanksgiving for the past and of prayer for the future. As it says in the Sabbath morning service: To this day have thy mercies availed us and thy kindness not failed us, O Lord our God. And mayst thou never abandon us ever.⁴²

It seems that the author-narrator is a true believer in the wisdom of the Almighty and the manner in which He conducts His world. Nevertheless, one cannot but read it as one of Agnon's bitter ironies. The optimism in the last paragraph of the novel cannot balance the list of horrors described in *To This Day* and all the horrors which are about to come according to the rule of repetition of events. There is no end. The author vanishes into his own work, he is the narrator, he is Shmuel Yosef Bach the author of the repetition of events. The narrator summarizes for us a story he read in a book of Chinese legends. There once was an architect who decided to retire. Nevertheless, the emperor asks him to build one last castle for him. The reluctant architect finally «took a large canvas, painted a castle on it so skillfully that it looked real». The excited emperor comes to admire it but then discovers «it was nothing but a painting». He is furious. He reproaches the old artist «Not only have you disobeyed my orders, you have deceived me into thinking that the mere

40 Agnon 2009, 56 (translation slightly changed).

41. *Ivi*, 132.

42. *Ivi*, 175.

appearance of a building is a building». The architect knocked on the door he had painted, the door opens «and the architect stepped through it and was never seen again».⁴³ Agnon, by giving his own name to the narrator and to the author of the repetition of events, is vanishing in his own work. *To This Day* (*Ad Hena, Until Now*) is the Biology of Events where everything is a disaster that repeats itself always until now, always until the very moment of reading.

4. The Name of the Author

Like many authors, in World- and Jewish literature, Agnon was well aware of the common literary means of inserting his name into his work. In his case it was not a mere decoration, but an integral part of the way in which he perceived language, his work, and his activity as a writer.

Indeed, many of Agnon's critics answered the call to track his appearance in his own work as a character, and more important for our case here, to find traces of his name. Thus Dr. Rishel from the story *Yedidut* ("Friendship") can be identified as Agnon for the acronym of his name (in Hebrew the four letters *resh, yod, shin, lamed*) is identical to Agnon's name: Rabi Yosef Shmuel ha-Levi.⁴⁴ In the same manner Sharit (*shin, resh, yod, tet*) from *The Last Bus* is an anagram of Rashit (*resh, shin, yod, tet*), i.e. Rabbi Shmuel Yosef Tchatchkes.⁴⁵ Another critic claimed that Agnon names two historical characters in *The Book of Deeds* – the Rabbis *Shmuel* Emden and *Yosef* Eybeschutz – only because their first names represent his own first and middle names.⁴⁶

One cannot accuse these students of Agnon's work for being too eager and too creative. What might not apply for other authors is called for in Agnon's case. We saw above how Agnon became Agnon, but before everything he was a Levi as well, as he was a Yosef and a Shmuel:

When I knew how to write all the letters, I wrote verses from the Psalms starting with the letters of my name such as: Sing the lord, bless His Name..., «And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water... My defense is of the Lord, which saveth the upright of heart...», «Unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul...», «Examine me, O Lord, and prove me...», and «Lead me, O Lord, in Thy righteousness». When my hand became stronger, I wrote verses that I made up myself (...) When my hand grew more powerful, I wrote songs and poems (...) When my hand became still stronger I made other songs».⁴⁷

43. *Ivi*, 65.

44. Bahat 1962, 151.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Rozenzweig 1956, 78. The Rabbis Jonathan Eybeschutz (1690-1764) and Jacob Emden (1697-1776) disputed each other, and the latter accused the first to be a follower of Sabbatai Zevi.

47. Agnon 1968, 398.

The name of the author is more than a mere childish linguistic play. The name is the beginning of his writing. The combination of two givens texts – his name and the Book of Psalms – is his new creation. It is what signifies the beginning of his writing. It is from when he knew “how to write all the letters” that he started writing, writing by copying from the Book of Psalms using the letters of his name. It is what enables him to write “other songs” in the future, works in which his name will still remain a driving creative force.

Levi, another name reference Agnon uses time and again, stems from his Levite ancestry. Disaster, the author’s name and writing, all appear in a condensed form in the Nobel speech: «I belong to the Tribe of Levi; my forebears and I are of the minstrels that were in the Temple, and there is a tradition in my father's family that we are of the lineage of the Prophet Samuel, whose name I bear».⁴⁸

Jewish thought and practice, or better yet classic Jewish notions regarding language (Hebrew), have an even greater influence on Agnon’s work than the ideas mentioned above. The idea that God created the world by using language (the Torah) means that language and text take precedence to reality and things, both chronologically and morally. In several places like in *The Book of Hanokh Haḥabashi* we can read that God created the world using His own name, the Tetragrammaton.⁴⁹ Another *Midrash*, cited by Agnon, maintains that «one of the letters of the Tetragrammaton Name» is to be found in each and every of the letters of the Torah.⁵⁰ The Torah and the world are God’s autograph, just as Agnon’s work and life are his own autograph, his writing of the self. He uses his name to create but is being created by the same very use. And if one is still not convinced that Agnon attributes holiness to his new acquired name, not to say connects it with God’s name lets us observe the following.

In one of his posthumous writings, Agnon writes something quite overwhelming. In *Pitḥey Dvarim*, the titular story of the volume in which it appears, Agnon talks about Gmulah and Ginat, the protagonists of *Edo and Enam* briefly mentioned above. Immediately afterwards he is thinking for himself that from «the day the world was created until my birth, the holy letters had never joined into any name as mine. Suddenly certain people came and took the name».⁵¹

It might be a late reaction for Mr. Shammi’s attempt to robe Agnon from his *‘Agunot* and by extension, from his name. In any case we can see that Agnon is consciously adopting his new name, and turns it into a unique and sacred name. It is a unique case in which the author invents an anthroponym not for one of his characters (as he abundantly does), but for himself, and then uses the

48. Agnon 1969, 615.

49. Gruenwald 1994, 94.

50. Agnon 1978b, 119.

51. Agnon 1978a, 105.

same invented name to create his characters. The arbitrariness of creation seeks after a guiding rule. That guiding rule brands Agnon's life and work with the seal of existential *'aginut*. He is like the lonely God joylessly ruling the universe he created for himself in his own image.

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