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Nostalgia and Nightmare, A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon

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NOSTALGIA AND NIGHTMARE

S. Y. AGNON WAS ONE OF THE GREATEST HEBREW WRITERS. On receiving the Nobel prize for literature in 1966, he attained world recognition. Some of his major works have been translated into English and German. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be available a complete critical evaluation of his literary activity and a detailed discussion of its inspirational background in any language. Edmund Wilson's essay on this doyen of Hebrew literature merely tends to emphasize the need for a systematic and critical review of Agnon's contribution to Hebrew Letters.

This task has now been undertaken by Arnold J. Band¹ in an ambitious effort to analyze all his subject's published writings from 1903 to the fall of 1966, aiming at leading "the reader through the labyrinth of Agnon's literary output" (p. 453). This has been a seven years' labor, involving the writer in complex research, meticulous comparisons, rational deductions and psychological probings. Undoubtedly, Mr. Band has opened some new vistas for the Agnon reader and has benefited him with some original insights into the stories of the Hebrew prose master. Yet, one is hard pressed to determine whether thereby Mr. Band has fulfilled the main aim he set to himself in writing his extensive work. He has thrown too wide a net. His book assumes almost encyclopedic proportions. He wanted to delve into everything Agnon ever wrote and attempt at deciphering all his secrets. Instead, he should have limited himself to a much more general discussion of his subject, realizing that Agnon "is almost unknown outside Hebrew literary circles" (p. vii). What was expected was a study in more general terms, where Mr. Band would have brought out Agnon's main traits, immanent qualities, extraneous influences, mode of writing and his original Hebrew. Instead, Mr. Band has undertaken a Sisyphean labor by offering the reader detailed summations of Agnon's three major works ("Hakhnasat kala", "Ore'ah nata lalun", "Temol shilshom"), as well as of numerous other stories. Indeed, this is of little value to the reader, for even a well-done and exhaustive summary can hardly convey even a smattering of the creative greatness of Agnon. It is very doubtful that any translation of Agnon's stories can do the writer full justice. To really understand this writer one should be able to delve into his spiritual

¹ *Nostalgia and Nightmare, A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968, 563 p.

depths to the extent of identifying oneself with his themes, and this apparently cannot be done without mastering his Hebrew to perfection and read the works in their original. The almost worn-out cliché—"the style is the man"—is still admirably applicable to Agnon, and to fully comprehend his topics with all their niceties, allusions, insinuations, metaphors, symbols, allegories and romantic verisimilitudes, one must acquaint oneself with the innumerable layers of Jewish civilization heaped up inexorably throughout the ages. Agnon's greatness lies in the world-embracing vistas of his people, being endowed and imbued with all its accumulated spiritual riches.

Mr. Band rightly points out that Agnon is first and foremost a storyteller, a raconteur. His narrations have usually little of plot action in them. "Agnon makes a story out of the slightest material, often a custom, an object, or a random idea. At times he appends some plot action to demonstrate a point, but he is primarily interested in the folkloristic element for its own sake" (p. 281). Agnon is hardly a novelist in the ordinary sense of the term, and naturally, he prefers the presentation of "a gallery of sketches rather than a few selected portraits" (p. 313). Indeed, he can be regarded as a storyteller in the Oriental tradition of Scheherazade, a yarn spinner with endless flights of imagination. Any current incident, however flippant, kindles his mind and fructifies his fantasy. His memory is strictly associative. A single Biblical quotation, a mere fraction of a legend, a meaningful name, an intuitive aspersion, sometimes even a literary ambiguity or a homily, may, as it were, throw him off his guard and lead him to a sharp deviation from the main course with the sole purpose of spinning a side-story, almost totally unrelated to the original theme.

Mr. Band dwells at considerable length on the numerous attempts that have been made by critics to resolve the enigmatic symbols and allegories which abound in Agnon's stories. "This study", he writes in his preface, "builds upon the works of hundreds of critics and scholars and is, in a sense, a summation of them". This, however, far from quenching our Sherlock Holmesian curiosity, increases our perplexity, and confusion becomes compounded. Some of Agnon's symbolism Mr. Band ascribes to his religious heritage, and even compares it with Dante's "structured symbolism of the medieval church" (p. 199). Consequently, for the purpose of deciphering Agnonic enigmas one is never amiss in having resort to religious exegesis or hermeneutics, and certainly the employment of homilectic devices is legitimate. For instance, names of places and characters in his stories are meaningful. The name of Agnon's birthplace, Buczacz in Galicia, *Shibush* ("error" in Hebrew), is certainly meant to convey

a special connotation, and Mr. Band develops a whole theory about that (p. 243 et al.). On the other hand, Mr. Band is completely at a loss to arrive at some explanation of the names of two figures mentioned in the story "Kishre Kesharim",—"Yosef Eybeschütz and Shmu'el Emden, a clever concoction of Agnon's own first and second names and the last names of the two bitter rabbinic rivals of the eighteenth century, Yonatan Eybeschütz and Ya'akov Emden" (p. 339). Agnon's story "'Ido ve'Enam" is particularly illusive on account of its numerous mysterious allusions and name alliterations, and has consequently produced a mass of critical interpretations; the most comprehensive and ingenious of these is that of Meshulam Tochner (p. 395). Mr. Band's assertion that this "is not a difficult story, not an enigma" is therefore surprising.² And the most baffling of all is the case of the dog Balak in "Temol shilshom",—a matter which is dealt with at great length by Mr. Band (p. 416 ff.).

Agnon's extensive use of symbols, "existentialist" devices and the general application of the enigmatic genre throughout his writings, has led many to discern an apparent influence of Kafka on him (most particularly in respect to his "Sefer hama'asim"). Mr. Band deals with this matter extensively and convincingly, pointing out that Agnon's Yiddish story "Toiten-Tantz", which is so strikingly Kafkaesque, was written in 1906 or 1907, that is, six years before Kafka's literary debut (p. 52). In chapter 10 of his book, Mr. Band underlines the elements of affinity between these two writers. They have both inherited a style of writing rooted in German Romanticism. Moreover, in his youth, Agnon was reared on the Scandinavian writers, whose works were available in a German rendering, and was deeply impressed by Hamsun's *Mysteries*.

Agnon's biography and works are inextricably interwoven. Indeed, most of his stories contain autobiographical elements. "Beginning with an actual incident in his life, Agnon spins a tale of fantasy so beguiling that the reader is hardly aware of the transition from fact to fiction" (p. 230). One is no longer capable of drawing a line of demarcation between reality and imagination. Having had a chance of watching Agnon from close quarters, Mr. Band concludes that the Hebrew writer "is a complicated, cagey person and, consciously or unconsciously, has already succeeded in projecting a mystical, mythical mask" (p. ix). He also considers it his duty, before "the myth has hardened beyond analysis", to reach at the real Agnon and depict him and his work as they really are.

² Indeed, one feels that "'Ido ve'Enam" somewhat deserves the interpretative treatment accorded by Anthony Burgess to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

In this respect, however, Mr. Band's work is a disappointment. What should have proved a unique privilege, of having spent many illuminating hours with Agnon, seems to have been completely dissipated. His "Cultural Biography" of Agnon (pp. 1-28) is meager, lacking in depth of background material, superficially discursive where it should have been helpful in giving the reader a closer view of Agnon's ancestral, spiritual and metaphysical mainsprings, which have made such a deep-rooted imprint on his entire creative work as an artist. Mr. Band has somewhat made up for this shortcoming by providing the reader with exhaustive and most useful bibliographies and appendices (to the extent of a fifth of his book), but this, again, would be serviceable mainly to those who can read Agnon in Hebrew, whereas, so it seems, Mr. Band's aim was to acquaint the general English reader with the work of the Hebrew master. Mr. Band's biographical chapter is too schematic, being a mere outline. Judging from it one can hardly sense and gauge Agnon's greatness.

Special mention should be made of Mr. Band's effort to draw the reader's attention to various stories not included in Agnon's collected works, as well as to the existence of several versions of some of his most important stories. "Throughout his life Agnon has repeatedly revised his stories for each new edition, and I take note of this process in the text as well as in the bibliographies" (p. xv). This should have proved an invaluable source for probing Agnon's mind, foibles, recurrent motifs and instructive deviations. (One is reminded of a similar indicative clue in regard to Tolstoy's "War and Peace", copied by the Russian writer with copious "corrections" seven times!) Unfortunately, Mr. Band deals with this indispensable source of information merely from the technical point of view, rather than substantially, a method which might have helped to unfold Agnon's intrinsic literary merit and "workshop" secrets. (See, for instance, his treatment of the three different versions of *Hakhnasat kala*, pp. 130-131.)

Another aspect of Mr. Band's criticism deserves special credit. He sagaciously refers the reader to the various autobiographical, self-revelatory stories where Agnon proffers some hints concerning his craft. True, the author's image in these stories is fragmentary, occasionally even shrouded with fantastic data, yet by and large they can serve as indications of his mentality, mental predilections and dreams. (Compare, for instance, Hemdat's personality in "Be'era shel Miryam", pp. 63-67., "Agadat hasofer", pp. 109-113., "Hush hare'aḥ", pp. 229-230., "Ore'aḥ nata lalun", pp. 321-323.)

It is to be regretted that Mr. Band makes so little use of the lengthy conversations he must have had with Agnon in Jerusalem. One

wonders what might have engaged them in those parleys and what were the topics discussed, if so little is reflected in the rather voluminous text. No single quotation of Agnon appears anywhere in the ten chapters. Judging from a single none too complimentary remark,³ one is bound to conclude that Mr. Band made it a point to avoid any quotations, lest the reader be dragged into an imaginary world lacking any basis in truth.

Then, again, in view of the extensiveness of his book, Mr. Band should have devoted much more space in an attempt to define and describe the peculiarities of Agnon's Hebrew style.⁴ For, after all, besides his greatness as a writer, Agnon has the reputation of one of the great master moulders of the Hebrew style in modern Hebrew literature, considered, in this respect, to be on par with Mendele, Bialik and Ahad Ha'am.

In both "Preface" and "Epilogue" (pp. vii, and 449), Mr. Band explains the title of his book, "Nostalgia and Nightmare", correlating Agnon's creative art with that of the underlying cultural heritage of Marcel Proust (nostalgia) and Kafka (nightmare). This has obligated Mr. Band to immerse himself in an extensive exposition of the legendary, folkloristic literature (mainly German), as well as in a discussion of the Gothic style, as being the main and constant sources of inspiration for Agnon. Yet, both designations (nostalgia and nightmare) refer more particularly to the Jewish European past, and fail to bring into sharp focus the other pivotal factor in Jewish history, namely, the Land of Israel. To be sure, Mr. Band discusses ably and minutely the leit-motif of "home" in Agnon's works, and also rightly points out the two fundamental elements of Jewish existence, as viewed by Agnon—the Tora and Eretz Israel; but he failed to stress the centrality of Agnon's nostalgic yearnings, which was the Land of Israel, rather than the European Diaspora. In a pathetic moment of associative identification, Agnon, in his acceptance speech at Stockholm, significantly confessed his feeling to have been born in Jerusalem, from which his *direct* family had been driven by the Romans following the destruction of the Second Temple. In this respect, one may truly conclude that Agnon always considered himself merely an *Ore'ah nata lalun* ("A Wayfarer Who Tarried for a Night") in his native Galicia. It is interesting to note, at this juncture, that the Swedish Academy, when granting Agnon the Noble Prize, fully grasped this one-sided polarity, regarding Agnon as a

³ "Abundant personal contact with him has convinced me that even the simplest details of everyday existence are always recast by his relentless fantasy", p. 450.

⁴ There is an almost casual reference to this in pp. 91-92.

representative of the Jewish people, as it were, geographically, namely, of the State of Israel, for by wishing at the same time to reward the Jewish people as a whole—that of Israel and of the Dispersion—it found it necessary to “complement” the representation of the dual Jewish heritage by adding Nelly Sacks to share the prize. This Swedish view of the Jewish dichotomy was misplaced, for Agnon even-handedly represents both parts of Jewry. Mr. Band, on the other hand, for the sake of the name of his book, brought Agnon over to the “European” side.

To sum up: Mr. Band’s book is a summation of the various literary works of criticism of Agnon. It is the largest exposé so far published in any language dealing with the totality of Agnon’s writings. Yet, the English reader, unacquainted with Agnon’s stories in the original, will hardly be able to derive the maximum benefit of this elaborate piece of research. It seems that a Hebrew translation of the book would be regarded as an excellent manual for Agnon’ admirers, and would thus serve a useful purpose.

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