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S. Y. AGNON'S ART OF NARRATIVE: PORTRAIT OF THE
ARTIST AS A SENTIMENTAL SWINDLER

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In memory of my beloved parents Rachel and Itzhak

ABSTRACT

Agnon's most worthy and complex poetics are often associated with the aesthetically dexterous fashion the textual narrator forms and operates. A most appealing and prominent characteristic of Agnon's narrator is his cultivation of the reader's expectations, which eventually will be surprisingly denied and frustrated. In other words, Agnon's narrator deliberately leads the reader astray. This is done by the author for purposes of emphasis. The reader's surprise forces him/her to pay particular attention to the issue at hand, and thus to fully appreciate the contextual importance. This strategy on the part of the narrator proves to be a powerful poetic tool which not only enriches the text's aesthetic tissue but also contributes to a better display of the text's ideological "Gospel." Agnon's impressive mastery of his aesthetic medium is translated into a variety of textual devices, each of them utilizing differently the narrator's performance as "swindler."

"The trouble is that everything
comes with pain"
(S. Y. Agnon, *Simple Story*)¹

S. Y. Agnon is the storyteller who led astray. This feature of the Agnonian craft infiltrates and embroiders each layer of his prose. However, this essay will focus only on rhetoric and composition and how they are related to the Agnonian proclivity to question, criticize, produce irony, and lead astray. After a quick reading of Agnon's novella *Sipur pashut* ("Simple Story"), one might argue that it is the gloomy history of a chastised protagonist, young Hirschel, who surrendered to his mother's pressure, evicted his beloved Blooma from his life, married Mina, and correspondingly doomed himself to grief and agony.

¹ S. Y. Agnon (1888–1971) was the first Hebrew writer to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature (1966).

Although it seems at the conclusion that Hirshel finds some comfort with Blooma, happiness evades him. The *joie de vivre* which he could experience with Blooma has been lost. However, as the plot of the novella evolves, the narrator introduces a small side story, as many Agnonian narrators do.² That side story takes the reader to Hirshel's remote past:

Hirshel had a friend in his childhood whom he wrongly believed to be his best friend. Once that friend let Hirshel down and Hirshel was grieving about it. Hirshel's mother noticed her son's grief, and she embraced him, caressed his head, and kissed his forehead. Eventually, Hirshel thought no more of his friend and found comfort with his mother. (my translation)

As the narrator completes this side story, he becomes an intrusive narrator, and invades the fictional world with his commentary: "What happened to Hirshel in his childhood, happened again in his adolescence."

A well-trained Agnonian reader can do without that intrusive commentary; such a reader already knows there will be a naive side story. It establishes an analogous equation resembling the master track of the novella. On both sides of the equation—the main plot and the side story—there is young Hirshel grieving over his absence from the friend in the side story, and over Blooma in the main plot. The cords of analogy which bind the side story to the plot of the novella encourage the reader to assume a complete analogy and tempt him/her to assume that the happy ending of the side story will be repeated in the conclusion of the novella. In other words, the analogy between the side story and the main plot of the novella seems to give the conclusion of the side story a foreshadowing role: that conclusion predicts a happy ending, so correspondingly it spurs the reader on to optimistic expectations. But when the reader reaches the end of the novella, he is surprised to find that the narrator has led him astray: the ending does not agree with the optimistic side story and the optimistic expectations are denied, breached, and refuted.

² Cf. Yair Mazor, עגנון, הדינמיקה של מוטיבים ביצירות ש. י. עגנון (The dynamics of motifs in S. Y. Agnon's works) (Tel Aviv, 1979), pp. 101–103.

Nevertheless, the narrator's "swindling" is not without purpose. The rhetorical device of frustrated expectations is attached to the theme and ideology of the novella. The gap between the optimistic expectations and their disappointing frustration produces a piercing irony. That irony is addressed to Hirshel's mother who robs her son of his happiness to satisfy social conventions (and correspondingly destroys her son emotionally), as well as to Hirshel himself who obeys his mother's emotional oppression without question. The narrator's swindling is therefore a rhetorical vehicle which conveys the writer's implied values and critical views. The narrator's hint leads the reader astray, but the author does not; he leads the reader to the heart of his hero's psychological darkness.

Agnon uses a similar rhetorical device in another story. The title is *והיה העקוב למישור* ("And the rugged shall be made level," an allusion to the well-known phrase in Isaiah 40:4), which is highly ironic because in the story nothing "rugged" becomes "level."³ It is a story about a poor couple whose poverty forces them to part. The husband, Menashe-Hayyim, leaves to earn enough money to support his wife. Because of a case of mistaken identity, his wife is told that he has passed away while in exile. She remarries, gives birth to a child, and finds comfort in her new life. Years later the husband returns to his old hometown. When he finds that his wife has remarried, he withdraws from life and seeks shelter in a graveyard, where he remains. In the overture of the story, before the husband has gone into exile and he and his wife have experienced the distress of their deteriorating circumstances, the narrator implants within the text a tiny side story, which deviates from the main direction of the plot. At first the reader may wonder why the narrator "violates" and suspends the sequence of the plot by injecting a side story that seems clumsily patched onto the fabric of the plot and is completely at odds with its content. But as the reader ponders the content of the side story, he is tempted to presume that it relates not only to the major theme of the narrative, but also predicts the conclusion.

³ Cf. Yair Mazor, *The Triple Cord: Agnon, Hamsun, Strindberg: Where Hebrew and Scandinavian Literatures Meet*. (Tel Aviv, 1987), and "August Strindberg and S. Y. Agnon: Swedish Cantons in the Regions of Modern Hebrew Literature," *Scandinavica*, 24 (1985): 35–55.

This side story tells the tale of a man who faces tormenting distress and who has no chance of attaining surcease, but his innocent faith in God extricates him from certain calamity and brings him to a "safe haven." Like the narrator in *Simple Story*, the narrator of *And the Rugged Shall Be Made Level* adds an encouraging intrusive commentary: "And that which happened to the old believers will perhaps happen to the present ones." Reading this prophecy the reader is encouraged to adopt and nurture optimistic expectations. He tends to believe that the side story will be repeated. But as the reader reaches the dark climax of the story, he finds that he was "betrayed" by a deceiving narrator: the "great expectations" that he was brought to entertain are sharply denied. The narrator's "promise" has gone unfulfilled: the fortunate fate of that old believer is definitely not shared by the younger follower in faith, the unhappy hero.

Thus, the reader is swung to and fro, back and forth, by the text; he is encouraged to believe one thing even as its subversion sends him back, and the frustration of this expectation sheds new light on the information that caused the expectation. As Iser put it, "The act of reaction is not a smooth or continuous process, but one which, in its essence, relies on interruptions of the flow to render it efficacious. We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of reaction."⁴

In this case the sharp gap between optimistic expectation and its disappointing refutation, between what has been promised and what actually happens, gives rise to a bitter irony that fortifies and intensifies the reader's awareness of the hero's woeful collapse.

The narrator again proves his rhetorical dexterity. Armed with deliberately deceiving rhetoric, he directs his reader to draw false conclusions because of partial information. The rhetoric is thus endowed with proficient expressiveness. The deceiving rhetoric turns into a vehicle which conveys the implied credo as well as the j'accuse. Although deception occurs in a different way in this story, the principle is the same. In viewing the story from a compositional standpoint, there is a gap between what was indicated at an early stage of the reading process and what actually occurs in a later stage. Significant portions of the expositional sequence of the piece

⁴ Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose-Fiction," in *Aspects of Narrative*, ed. J. H. Miller (New York, 1971), p. 292.

goad the reader to assume a traditional, Aristotelian causality. It is only in a fairly late stage of the text continuum that the reader realizes that he has been swindled; the apparent causal order is found to be only a thin epidermal crust that conceals a “deep structure” (adopting the generative-formative grammar’s useful term) which deviates from the surface causality, erecting a perturbing, disengaged sequence. In light of this, the reader’s tolerance toward the disruption of the causal texture is difficult to guarantee; he is most likely to attribute the disrupted causality to the author’s artistic shortcomings. But once the reader becomes thoroughly familiar with the nature of Agnon’s structure, ideology, and aesthetic rationale, he realizes that his *prima vista* was in fact erroneous; it was just a conscious authorial ploy perpetrated by Agnon. An examination of the compositional embroidery in the piece and its literary motivation sheds new light upon the alleged compositional fallacy, which is an adroitly executed, compositional-rhetorical device that generates a sophisticated text. The story in question is *בין שתי ערים* (Between two cities).⁵

In examining the apparently splintered composition of this story, caused by the disruptive intrusion of an unexpected turn of plot, it is essential to summarize the fictional features of the two allegedly conflicting parts of the story. The story opens with a tale of two small towns located in a region of Bavaria. Both have the same name, Katsenau. One of them is rather grey and oppressed, a working-class town of little splendor. Among its population is a small Jewish congregation consisting of shopkeepers. The other town is much more appealing, being a resort town famous for medical baths and springs that attract many people, especially in the summer. The distance between the two towns is not great, and many Jewish people from the less attractive Katsenau indulge themselves on Sabbath by walking to the more attractive twin town. Here they enjoy the animated beauty of the woods, the refreshing air, and escape from their labors for a while.

One day, during World War I, Isidor Shaltheiz, a Jewish teacher from Frankfurt, arrives in the resort of Katsenau for a vacation. He soon grows tired of spas and becomes idle and restless. He spends

⁵ Cf. Yair Mazor, *The Triple Cord*, and “S. Y. Agnon’s Art of Composition: The Befuddling Turn of the Compositional Screw,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986): 197–208.

his hours walking, and one day arrives at the neighboring poorer Katsenau. Although this Katsenau is not as attractive as the resort Katsenau, this is compensated for by the kindness of its Jewish congregation. When these generous people discover that the recovering teacher has a family in the big city which is deprived of the good food which they can so easily provide, they give him parcels stuffed with delicious food to send to his family. One day, during his journey between the two cities, the bored teacher begins to count his footsteps, trying to pass the time between meals. While counting, he realizes that the distance between the two cities exceeds the bounds of the Sabbath limit (in Hebrew, *tehum shabbat*)—the prescribed distance Jewish people may not exceed on Sabbath without violating religious law. The teacher feels that it is his duty to notify the Jewish congregation of Katsenau that their weekly refreshing walks to the baths of Katsenau should be strictly prohibited since they constitute a severe religious transgression. Consequently the Sabbath walks cease, and the few enjoyable hours that the hard-working Jewish people have are taken away. The teacher continues to relish the luxury of his daily walks and to receive food from the Jewish people, while they have lost their one pleasure in life. The climax (which is a typical anticlimax) of the plot passes; the peripety has been committed and the plot moves towards its turning point. Still, an unexpected surprise awaits the reader.

The story does not end. Instead, it develops a continuation with a new direction. This unanticipated development becomes more astounding as the reader learns that the new chapter does not proceed from the previous events. On the contrary, its content seems to have no relationship with the previous fictional trends of the story. Thus the impression of a loose organizational structure seems a valid criticism.

The unexpected addition deviates from the plot of the story by concentrating on the grief-filled misfortunes which the war has caused for the people of the two cities. The vicissitudes of war, mentioned only obliquely in the first part of the story, become prominent in the second part. Thus, the apparently excessive addition is a major thematic element of the second part of the story which has been anticipated in the first portion of the story. Hence it may be considered a foreshadowing integrative element which connects the two detached parts.

In the second part of the story, the reader becomes acquainted with the aggravating distress of the baker's family, whose only son has volunteered for the war, despite his physical limitations; he was severely injured and lost both legs. From this point in the story the blemished leg, or the oedipus (in Greek, "marred foot") acts as a prominent metonym in the narrative. The baker's wife has a sister who lives in the resort Katsenau, but because of the amassed daily troubles the two sisters cannot get together. Here one encounters another integrative element that glues the two parts of the story together. In both parts the short distance between the two cities is important and seems longer, because of the disturbing occurrences associated with the distance. Thus the short distance between the two cities is extended far beyond its geographical measure. The two sisters decide to meet in the forest midway between the two cities.

As has been noted, references to the metonym of the injured leg are central to the second part of the story. The leg motif also extends to the sisters. The sister who is waiting in the forest runs impatiently to and fro or stands as if her legs are chained to the ground. It appears that almost all the functions of legs are enumerated in Agnon's description of her:

She was *stepping* to and fro, *returning* and *standing*, as if her *legs were bound* to the ground, and she doesn't know why she is *standing* there and not *running* towards her sister as her heart is *running* and pining towards her. (my translation)

Similar descriptions, saturated with references to legs, are repeated as the two sisters meet. "Were those her *legs* that were *running*? It was her heart that was *running* and her *legs* followed it."

The gloomy atmosphere that permeates the scene is excessively oppressive and not likely to be overlooked by the reader. Consequently the leg references mentioned in this closing paragraph of the story are to be considered "oedipal." Once the reader couples the leg metonym, portraying the sisters' grim fortune, with the opening reference to the soldier's amputated legs, he is in a better position to diagnose the meaning of the disfigured leg metonym in the story's addition; it is a symbol of the distress of the characters.

Hence one may say that the metonym of the leg, inserted in a context of distress, acts as a benchmark of the clumsy addition to the story. Yet Agnon's capacity to reinvest a common symbol with a

new meaning to harmonize with new subject matter does not initially account for the disrupted composition of the story of the disturbing gulf between its parts. But the fact is that it does.

The leg metonym has already been alluded to as the integrative element which binds the two parts of the story together. The major source of distress for the Jewish congregation is the sudden revelation that the baths in Katsenau are beyond the Sabbath limit, and the walks to these baths are forbidden. The unexpected prohibition of these walks means the townspeople are deprived of even the slightest chance for *joie de vivre*.

In this story any act of walking is an obtrusive reference to the leg metonym. Thus the misfortune of the Jewish community in the first part of the story is conspicuously attached to the oedipus metonym—the metonym of the marred leg. Furthermore, the second part of the story is sprinkled with references of the marred leg metonym (the amputated legs of the soldier, the restless running legs of the two sisters, their feeling that their feet are tied to the ground, their somber walking in two different directions), and the major thematic and ideological trends also relate to the marred leg metonym (the agony of the baker's wife because her only son has lost his legs, and the inability of the two sisters to meet despite the short distance between the two cities). These factors make the analogous cords between the two parts of the story very tight.

In both parts of the story the metonym of the marred leg permeates the heart of the characters' agony. The characters are deprived of their one feeble chance to experience joy in life. The prohibited walking on the Sabbath between the two cities conspicuously foreshadows the inability of the sisters to walk between the two cities. Hence the absence of a causal connection between the two parts of the story is fully compensated for by a highly persuasive, analogous connection. The integrity of the complete story is maintained. In spite of a seemingly fragile surface, we find a sound inner unity. The leg is a prominent verbal element in many idiomatic expressions which relate either to rooted stability and might or to a lack of stability and feeble foundations (notably in Hebrew). For instance, "to stand firmly," or "be of sturdy stance," translate into Hebrew as "to stand on both feet." The phrase "A lie has short wings" translates as "A lie has no feet," in Hebrew. "One foot in the grave" also means a close collapse. "There is a foundation for it," is in Hebrew "there are legs for it," etc. Thus maintaining the idea of the blemished leg in the two parts of the

story turns into a symbol which radiates the major theme of the story: the unfortunate, loose, and shaky life which the people of the two towns experience after the war.

The analogous metaphorical relationship between the two parts of the story is not limited to its composition; it is also harnessed to the major ideological credo of the story, which is the perpetual anguish that clings to human disunion. The two components of the analogous equation—the Jews' prohibited walk between the two cities in the first part and the walk from which the sisters abstain in the second part—are both reflections of anguish caused by human disharmony.

The second part of the story, then, does not deviate from the trend of the first. On the contrary, it acts as a mirror that reflects and enriches the first part with another angle of presentation. The two parts of the story are actually identical sides of the same fictional coin, two literary standpoints for the same idea. The authorial ploy has been pulled off; the first impression of a disrupted composition is replaced with a dexterously spun organization. Hence the crumbled nature of the story's bifurcated composition is far from being a *lapsus calami*. The compositional machinery behind the seemingly lame compositional Zeus is, in reality, formidable indeed. Agnon was a pious Jewish believer. Whether his narrators share his pious faith or not, they never allow their critical irony to be dislodged from their values. It was Longfellow who wrote:

In the older days of art
Builders wrought with greatest care
Each minute and unseen part
For the gods see everywhere.

Although Agnon worshiped another God than Longfellow's builders, his status among those master builders is certain and safe.