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Review

Author(s): Arthur M. Lesley

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**THE CENTRIFUGAL NOVEL: S. Y. AGNON'S POETICS OF COMPOSITION.** By Stephen Katz. Pp. 219. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999. Cloth, \$38.50.

The title of this book announces a thorough study of manuscripts of Agnon's *A Guest for the Night* (*Oreah Natah Lalun*), in order to trace the ways in which Agnon's developing conception of the novel spun off several important stories. The title accurately describes eight of the eleven chapters; two others trace motifs in the novel, and the remaining chapter demonstrates self-referentiality among Agnon's works. Although the "poetics of composition" in the subtitle is not developed systematically, the study offers evidence for such a poetics.

Katz opens with a forceful discussion of the manuscript evidence. Scholars have "overlooked Agnon's intentional manipulation of his own legacy through the archival materials he was amassing.... The Agnon to be preserved for the ages was to be the one projected in his fiction: the image of the implied author, mythicized by Agnon and an adoring public." Agnon deliberately suppressed fragmentary notes for the origins of the stories and early drafts, as Emuna Yaron, his daughter and literary executor, attested.

It is possible, then, only to trace the evolution of *Guest* from the earliest preserved manuscripts from 1938, which are nearly complete drafts of late stages of composition, until the second collected edition of Agnon's stories, in 1953. He defines the novel to be "centrifugal," rather than "centripetal," and illustrates centrifugal composition by a sculptor who chips away to reveal the "ideal sculpture imprisoned within a block of marble." Similarly, Agnon removed incidents and whole stories from *Guest* that did not conform to his developing conception of the work. In contrast with *Guest*, *Shira* is "a centripetal novel," which took shape by "a process of absorbing previously published shorter works or the creation of newer episodes."

Since both processes are part of the composition of any work, and since, as Katz demonstrates, Agnon changed his original conception of *Guest*, the whole novel cannot be characterized as "centrifugal." There was not a single "ideal sculpture" or "kernel" always present in the marble, from which excrescences were merely removed. The book traces the evolution of an unrecoverable, "ideal sculpture" of *Guest* into the existing novel which, Katz remarks, Agnon could have continued revising for the rest of his life. Hence the title of the second chapter, "From 'Becoming' to 'Being': *A Guest for the Night* in the Making."

*Guest* was at first divided into two parts: the first, a pessimistic description of a declining society, whereas the second offered signs of optimism and consolation. Several important characters are absent from the

earliest surviving manuscript, and events that are important in it later were discarded. For example, Agnon removed the story of Kuba Milch's first marriage, now "The Doctor and his Divorcee," to prevent it from unbalancing the "brief episodic character of the novel." Agnon surprisingly also eliminated mentions of Rav Kook, as part of an overall effort at "emotional distancing" and "enhancing the story's indeterminacy." The versions of *Guest*, until publication of the first Schocken edition, in 1939, show that Agnon steadily changed the authorial tone "from a sentimental naïveté to a sophisticated, ironic, and objective one."

Emendations in 1938 and 1939 tended to deepen the mood of despair, to express more forceful approval of palestinian Zionism, to be conciliatory towards the religious, and to speak with increasing circumspection about sexuality. Many small revisions mute an earlier polarization of Zionism and religion: a statement in the manuscript, that the pioneers who go to the Land of Israel, rather than tzaddikim alive or dead in the Diaspora, will be the first to see the Messiah, is not printed. Similarly, religious people of Shibush say, in the manuscript, that Zionism "is prohibited by the Torah," but in the printed edition they say, "the Zionists were trying to anticipate the coming of the Messiah, instead of waiting for salvation." Increasing modesty about sex changed the manuscript explanation, that Babtchi's dress was torn when "Dr. Zwerin grabbed her to kiss her and tore her dress," to the published mention of her dress, "which had been torn in an unfortunate incident that is not to be mentioned here."

Agnon continued to shape *Guest* after publication, as statistics comparing the Ha'aretz serialization of 1938–1939, the Schocken book of 1939, and the final revision in 1953 show. Revisions after the Ha'aretz serialization until the 1953 final version steadily reduced the length of the book by a total of about 5,000 words. Greater use of indirect speech necessitated adding many commas, and many small paragraphs were combined into fewer, longer ones.

"To Father's House," now in *The Book of Deeds*, began in manuscript as a pair of dreams that express the guest's desire to escape from present-day Shibush, which is no longer holy and traditional as he remembers it. "To Father's House" makes the dreams a single sequence, not called a dream, and the narrator no longer expresses a bewilderment that the reader shares with him. Agnon dropped other incidents from *Guest*: an anecdote embarrassing to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem was later included in *Shira*, and the events that became "The Redemption," in *A Bundle of Stories*. Katz explains convincingly the different significance these stories have within *Guest* and outside of it. Two other chapters trace important motifs in the novel: references to taste and smell, and to Jews as sons and daughters of

royalty. Extensive appendices compare passages in manuscript and published versions, in English translation.

A suggestive chapter, "The Guest as Hirshl: The Self-Referentiality of Agnon's Fiction," notes that characters in *Guest* refer to stories that the reader knows to be Agnon's as being writings of the guest. Further, the guest stays on Synagogue Street, where Akavia and Tirtza Mazal lived, in "In the Prime of Her Life," and where Blume Nacht took refuge with them, in *A Simple Story*. Characters and author thus nearly merge in the world that is composed of Agnon's stories. Agnon intended us to read all the surviving writings, including the manuscripts in the archives, as belonging equally to his *oeuvre*. Katz's study eases entry into that self-referential world, which is necessary for understanding Agnon's writings.

The traditional labor of manuscript study here makes available evidence for consideration of the genre, authorship, intertextuality and interpretation of *A Guest for the Night* and the writings that derive from it.

*Arthur M. Lesley*  
*Baltimore Hebrew University*  
*Baltimore, MD 21215*  
*lesley@bhu.edu*