

S. Y. AGNON'S ART OF COMPOSITION: THE BEFUDDLING TURN OF THE COMPOSITIONAL SCREW

by

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*"Do forgive me. Perhaps I cast a shade upon Agnon . . .
but I came here to speak about agony and about love
and about pain in Agnon that Qohelet who put on
various appealing disguises. And because of loving
him so dearly, I spoke about him this way and not another."*

(Amos Oz, *Under This Blazing Sun*)¹

1. Preamble

A remarkably intriguing aspect in S. Y. Agnon's art of composition² is that in a considerable number of his works, the reader is confronted by a strikingly confusing organization. As the story's plot seems to reach its climax and move toward its denouement, and all the conflicts of the fictional world face resolution, an unexpected, intrusive plot development is presented, which disrupts the natural concluding momentum of the piece and forces seemingly arbitrary continuation. The confused reader is forced to surmise that the writer (or implied author, following Booth, 1961) has clumsily violated his own aesthetics by inserting unrelated material into his story and consequently upset the story's composition,

1. All translations from Hebrew are by the writer of this paper.

2. Agnon's compositional craft has been discussed by many critics, especially Arnold Band, Hillel Barzel, Baruch Kurtzveil, Gabriel Moked, Dov Sadan, Gershon Shaked. Others, too, have an attentive interest in Agnon's art of composition and have produced many stimulating observations which shed a valuable light upon this challenging aspect of Agnon's writing. For a detailed bibliography of works by the critics mentioned above, see Mazor (1979, pp. 122-126).

undermined its integrity, and subverted its coherence. Furthermore, the flimsy nature of the casual sequence is not exposed in the overture of the piece itself. Many of Agnon's stories deliberately lead the reader astray. Significant portions of the piece's expositional sequence goad the reader to assume a traditional plot causality. Only in a relatively late stage of the text continuum does the reader realize that he has been misled; the commencing causal order is found to be only a thin veneer that conceals a "deep structure" which deviates from the surface causality, forming a disengaged sequence. But once the reader becomes thoroughly familiar with the nature of Agnon's structure, ideology and aesthetic rationale, however, he realizes that his *prima vista* was, in fact, erroneous; it was just a conscious authorial ploy perpetrated by Agnon. An examination of the composition in the piece and its literary motivation sheds new light upon the alleged compositional fallacy, which is an adroitly performed device that generates sophistication for the piece.

It is the aim of this paper to examine this attractive aspect of Agnon's compositional *ars poetica* through a close reading of two of his stories, "*Bên šetê 'arîm*" ("Between Two Cities") and "*Šnê talmîdê ḥākāmîm šehāyû be'îrênû*" ("Two Scholars Who Lived in Our Town").³

2. "*Between Two Cities*" - A Tale of Two Compositional Systems

In examining this story's composition, the apparent looseness of which is 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 in Bavaria. Both of the towns 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 escape their labors for a short while and enjoy the refreshing air and the animated beauty of the woods.

One day, during World War I, Isidor Shaltheiz, a Jewish teacher from Frankfurt, arrives in the resort of Katsenau for a vacation. He soon becomes idle and restless. He begins spending his hours walking, and one day he arrives at the neighboring, poorer Katsenau. This Katsenau is not

3. These stories may be found in Agnon (1971, pp. 5-53, 78-91).

as alluring as the resort-Katsenau, but its faded features are compensated for by the kindness of its Jewish congregation. When these generous people find out that the recuperating teacher has a family in the big city that is deprived of the good food they can easily provide, they give him parcels stuffed with delicious food to send to his family. (The fact that the recuperating teacher is pampering himself with dainties and idleness while his family lives in destitution is later poignantly juxtaposed.) One day, during his journeying between the two cities, the bored teacher begins to count his footsteps, trying to pass the time between meals. While counting his footsteps, the teacher realizes that the distance between the two cities exceeds the bounds of the Sabbath limit (in Hebrew: *Tēhūm Šabbāt*)—the prescribed distance Jewish people may not exceed on the Sabbath without violating the sacred laws of the Sabbath. The teacher feels that it is his duty to notify the Jewish congregation in Katsenau that their refreshing weekly walks to the baths of Katsenau should be strictly prohibited since they constitute a severe religious transgression. Subsequently, the Sabbath walks cease and the few enjoyable hours the hard-working Jewish people have are taken away. The teacher continues to relish the luxury of his daily walks and to accept food from the Jewish people, while they have lost their one pleasure in life. At this point, the story's woeful conclusion seems to be reached. The plot's climax, which is a typical anti-climax of the teacher's recompensive discovery, passes; the peripety has been committed and the plot moves toward its turning point. Still, an unexpected surprise awaits the reader.

The story does not end. Instead, it develops a continuation with a new channel. This unanticipated development becomes even more surprising as the reader learns that the new episode does not proceed from the previous events. On the contrary, its content seems to have no connection to the story's previous fictional trends. Thus, the impression of a loose composition seems a judicious criticism.

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

In the second part of the story, the reader becomes acquainted with the aggravating distress of the baker's family. The family's 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 *Oedi-pus* (in Greek, swell-foot), acts as a leading element in the story. The sister of the baker's wife lived in resort-Katsenau, but because of the amassed daily troubles, the two sisters are deprived of getting together. Here one encounters another integrative element that glues the story's parts together. In both the story 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. Once the reader is acquainted with the symbolic meaning of the forest in Agnon's works (for instance, Hershel, the chastised lover in "Simple Story" ["*Sippûr pāšût*" in Hebrew] goes insane in the forest), he is aware that the forest usually symbolizes a place of impending danger or a pessimistic outcome. The fact that a dog's bark is echoing in the entangled thicket as the meeting is about to take place reinforces the premonition of doom; in Agnon's writings, evil is associated with the figure of the dog (note, for instance, the prominent role of the mad dog in *Tēmôl šilšôm* [*Yesterday Heretofore*]).⁴ When the baker's wife reaches the meeting place in the forest, she is disappointed because her sister has not yet appeared. Although her sister does arrive at the end, her anxiety is indeed well-founded.

Suspense in Agnon's *ars poetica* is manifested by the flood of late buses, postponed trains and tardy streetcars demonstrated in "The Doctor and His Divorced Wife," *Šîrâh*, "The Last Bus" and many other works. These suspenseful incidents are always associated with neglected opportunities, agonizing misadventures, crumbling relationships or other misfortunes.

It has been noted that references to the deficient leg are central to the story's second part. The leg motif extends to the sisters as well. 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 legs' potential functions 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 didn't know why she was *standing* there and not *running* toward her sister as her heart was *running* and pining toward her."

4. Both the mad dog and the forest motifs have been previously probed by many of Agnon's critics (cf. David, 1972, p. 22) A recent consideration of these motifs is included in Fleck (1983) and Wineman (1983).

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." There are even more references to legs in the short, added chapter, but the most significant is the one that closes the story: "The day was fading . . . the two sisters were standing in mute silence. At last one turned in her place and the other turned in her place and between them the forest's trees blackened until the stars came out and lit the way for the two sisters . . . who just parted from each other for many days . . . as one walks to one side and the other walks to the other side."

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 evidently "oedipal". Once the reader couples the leg references portraying the sisters' grim fortune with the opening reference to the soldier's felled 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 character's woeful distress.

In contrast with many of Agnon's other stories in which the leg metonym functions as a symbol of an erotic deterioration (see Yael's limping leg in "The Hill of Sand" [*Gib^cat haḥôl*]); the lame woman in Hartman's dream in "Different Faces" [*Pānīm aḥērôt*]; Manfred's torn and ripped shoes in *Širāh*; the wooden leg of Mintshey, the rejected lover in "Simple Story" [*Sippûr pāsûi*] and more), Agnon deletes the sexual connotations of the legs metonym in "Between Two Cities" limiting its reference to human misfortune. Thus, Agnon's literary fabric is not arbitrary. He attentively selects and, in this case, remolds his symbols to adjust to the alternating literary needs.

However, the metonym of the leg, inserted in a context of distress, acts as a benchmark of the story's seemingly clumsy addition. Yet, Agnon's capacity to remold a common symbol with a new meaning in order to harmonize with new subject matter does not initially seem to account for the disrupted composition of the story or the disturbing gulf between its parts. But the fact is that it does, indeed.

The leg metonym has already been alluded to as the integrative element which binds the two story parts. The major source of the Jewish congregation's distress is caused by the sudden divulgence that the resort-Katsenau is beyond the Sabbath limit, and consequently the enjoyable walks to it on the Sabbath are forbidden. The unexpected prohibition of these walks means the town's people are deprived of even the humblest

chance for pleasure in their hard lives. The act of walking is an obvious reference—though indirect—to the leg metonym. Thus, the misfortune of the Jewish community in the story's first part is conspicuously attached to the metonym of the marred leg. Furthermore, the story's second part is sprinkled with references to the marred-leg metonym (the amputated legs of the soldier, the two sisters' restlessly running legs, their feeling that their legs are confined to the ground, their sombre walking in two different directions) and the major thematic trends also relate the the marred-leg metonym (the agony of the baker's wife because of her only son's felled legs, and the deficiency of the two sisters' capacity to meet with each other despite the short distance between their two cities). All these factors make the analogous strands 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 only feeble chance to gain life's joy: the prohibited Sabbath walking between the two cities conspicuously foreshadows the sisters' inability 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 cogent, analogous connection: the dominant thematic trend of each part is metaphorically reflected by that of the other. The integrity of the complete story is deftly maintained. Beyond the seemingly clumsy surface of loose organization, a sound inner unity is very much *in esse*.

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 goal 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 sisters' avoided walk between the cities in the second, 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 radiates and enriches the first part with another angle of presentation. The two parts of the story are actually identical sides of the same thematic 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. Thus, the tale of the two cities is a tale of two systems—one is anchored in the story's compositional structure and evokes a delusional impression of loose organization, while the other system is concealed in the story's foundation and solidifies both parts through a well-intertwined analogy. The story benefits from a sense of controlled harmony which helps its artistic integrity.

The conflicting trends of the two compositional systems prevent an undesirably rigid and mechanical relationship between the story's two parts. The deviation from a strict analogy, on the other hand, made possible by the seemingly loose compositional system, supplies the story with a rhetorical flexibility by bridling its tightness and inhibiting artificial impact. Consequently, a well-measured authenticity prevails in the story.

3. *"Two Scholars Who Have Lived in Our Town":
One Plus One Make One*

Like "Between Two Cities", "Two Scholars Who Have Lived in Our Town" is founded upon two parts which seem at odds with each other—the second part deviating from the first in terms of plot and focus. As in the previous case, the writer adds a second part which seems to display poor craftsmanship. This second part seems to disrupt the first part and, consequently, violate its coherence and subvert its integrity. But a close reading of the thematic trends within the story's two parts shows that the first impression of an unorganized piece is incorrect. The initial perception of a redundant and shaky composition, caused by a superfluous patch, gives way to a well-constructed composition.

The first part of the story is devoted to the tense conflict between two celebrated scholars, Rabbi Moshe-Pinchas and Rabbi Shlomo, in a small Jewish congregation. The differences between these two scholars is apparent in every facet of their beings. Rabbi Moshe-Pinchas is unattractive and has a coarse physique; he is moreover exceedingly meticulous, sullen, irascible and demonstrably unsocial. Rabbi Shlomo appears as the alter ego of Rabbi Moshe-Pinchas. Rabbi Shlomo is attractive, tolerant, highly social, tender and affable, and he possesses amicable manners. The unbridgeable gulf between them is reminiscent of the differences between Shammai and Hillel.⁵ Yet, despite their differences, a solid friendship thrives between them. Moshe-Pinchas' personal barrier prohibits others from getting close to him, but it seems to fade around Shlomo. Perhaps their differences yield attraction; perhaps their reciprocal scholarly excellence is the basis of their friendship. For whatever reason, the friendship between Moshe-Pinchas and Shlomo is evident.

However, friendship requires a delicate balance, and the relationship between Moshe-Pinchas and Shlomo deteriorates drastically. The cause

5. Shammai and Hillel were two leading scholars who conducted the Sanhedrin, an assembly of 71 ordained scholars, which was the supreme court and legislature during the Roman regime period in Israel during the last years of King Herod's reign and after his death (4 B.C.). Shammai gained his fame for being extremely severe in judgment, while Hillel gained his fame for his tolerant consideration.

of this decline seems fairly trivial, but it is sufficient to destroy their friendship forever. Oddly enough, the amicable Rabbi Shlomo seems to cause the clash. At the peak of a Talmudic debate, Moshe-Pinchas intones his arguments in a tempestuous manner, raising his voice and waving his arms furiously; this casts him in a rather ridiculous light. Attempting to pacify and calm him down the agitated Moshe-Pinchas, Shlomo used an idiomatic expression which might be considered teasing. It is obvious that Shlomo has not intended to insult Moshe-Pinchas. On the contrary, he probably thought that a touch of humor would be a delicate way of sparing Moshe-Pinchas any embarrassment. But Moshe-Pinchas is profoundly hurt and perplexed; he blushes, holds his words, and returns dejectedly to his seat. After that moment, he refuses to speak to Shlomo. Despite the divine commandment, Moshe-Pinchas bears a grudge and seeks to take vengeance.

Countless attempts by Shlomo to gain Moshe-Pinchas' forgiveness are rejected; his constant appeal falls on deaf ears. The rift between the two prominent scholars, which occurs early in the plot, casts a shadow upon the subsequent events of the story's first part. Moreover, the unresolved split not only leaves its grim mark on the rest of the occurrences in the story's first part, it seems to mold the characters in this grief-ridden state. For instance, when Shlomo is elected to serve as the chief rabbi of a neighboring Jewish congregation, Moshe-Pinchas disrupts Shlomo's scholarly acceptance speech with insults, attempting to contradict Shlomo's arguments and to shame him. But Shlomo does not take vengeance. On the contrary, he continues to laud Moshe-Pinchas' scholarly virtues in an effort to win his forgiveness. Still, his mulish adversary denies and rejects him.

The feud between the town's two venerable spiritual leaders inspires all the events in the plot of the story's first part. Thus, Moshe-Pinchas turns down an appealing offer to serve as a chief rabbi in a neighboring Jewish congregation when he learns that Shlomo has recommended him. Also, Shlomo is invited to serve as a chief rabbi in his hometown, but he turns down the tempting offer since Moshe-Pinchas' signature can't be obtained for the commission.

Moshe-Pinchas' animosity toward Shlomo also produces a well-designed thematic composition. Occurrences involving Moshe-Pinchas and Shlomo are intermittently mentioned, always calling attention to their unended quarrel. For each event that happens to Shlomo which is caused by his bitter antagonist, there is a counter-occurrence that happens to Moshe-Pinchas which is effected by his grudge against Shlomo.

This well-coordinated equation of theme and composition is underscored by another equation in the story's first part, the inverted character

pattern—a pattern founded upon a chiasmic motion. Shlomo's success is balanced inversely by Moshe-Pinchas' deterioration. As Shlomo ascends, becomes more esteemed, respected and famous, Moshe-Pinchas descends, declines and ultimately is excommunicated. The conflict between the two equations of the story's first part—a well-coordinated balance versus a chiasmic-reverse balance—defines an important thematic-ideological function as it evokes a sense of a split that reflects the split between the distinguished scholars, a split which injects a biting gloom in both their lives, drains their spiritual potency, and consequently deprives their congregations of full inspiration. Thus, the split between the two equations radiates the essence of the story's prevailing idea—the devastating power of a senseless feud and the powerful role of irrationality in human life.

The conflicting nature of the two equations is of rhetorical merit also, as it evokes a sense of authentic flexibility and prevents an undesirably rigid and mechanical effect. Thus, an effective dialectical pattern is obtained. On one hand, the two equations reinforce the composition of the story's first part as they yield compositional firmness. On the other hand, the conflicting trends of these two equations block a rigid stiffness by deviating from the tight compositional firmness.

The withdrawal of Moshe-Pinchas from the story's arena seems to violate the composition of the story and dismiss the story's major conflict—its dramatic essence. Moshe-Pinchas' death should move the story toward its conclusion. The nature of the split between the two scholars produces a paratactic sequence. From a theoretical standpoint, Moshe-Pinchas' enduring hostility toward Shlomo could produce an endless, horizontal sequence that lacks an ascending principle capable of extricating the plot from the sequential momentum and channelling it toward a climax. Theoretically, more and more fictional components (occurrences between Moshe-Pinchas and Shlomo) could join this horizontal continuum without drawing it closer to a climactic resolution. In this vein, Moshe-Pinchas' death plays the role of *deus ex machina*, or redeeming element which relieves the plot of its enduring momentum, disrupts the paratactical continuum and propels the plot toward its conclusion. The lack of a natural, inner extricating mechanism to deliver the culminating point of the fictional sequence is fully compensated for by the invasion of this external component, forcing a finale upon the plot by disregarding its most fundamental trend.⁶

6. The aesthetic-rhetorical features of the paratactical literary sequence and the function of the foreign extricating element have been thoroughly discussed in Herenstein-Smith (1968).

In spite of this, the story does not climax with Moshe-Pinchas' death, but evolves into an extended continuation. Furthermore, this unexpected continuation seems to abuse a leading thematic track in the story's first part. Shlomo's undeniably firm authority in the story's first part is severely shaken in the second. Though he is far from being completely powerless, he is certainly enfeebled. Thus, continuing the story after it seemed to reach its ultimate conclusion, and by patching a second part which violates a major thematic trend in the first part, appears questionable and upsetting. However, as with the story previously discussed, this impression of a poor composition is unjust: the seemingly botched composition is prudently motivated by sense, idea and well-wrought aesthetics.

The demise of Shlomo's authority seems to be an outgrowth of his reluctance to abandon justice for the sake of the brazen demands of the congregational members who wish to dominate and exploit weaker members. More than once, Shlomo is exposed to the impudence of the sanctimonious disputants, who openly display their disfavor and seek to subvert his position by insolent brawls. Yet Shlomo refuses to compromise his moral values.

Oddly enough, this grave situation comes into existence after Shlomo's arch rival, Moshe-Pinchas, has passed away. One would expect that Shlomo's foes would fade since his mighty adversary is no longer there to support their impertinence. Still, they are most insolent. Their denigration is no more than a delusion which will be fully deciphered in light of the comprehensive interpretation of the story, as the underlying knot between its two conflicting parts is untied.

The relative demise of Shlomo's authority seems to be translated into compositional concepts. As already mentioned, the story's first part exhibits a compact, solid composition.

In the second part of the story, the undermining of Shlomo's authority is expressed by the crumbling of the composition. Attempts by the powerful, dissatisfied rivals to demolish Shlomo's authority, moving demonstrations of Shlomo's gracious attitude toward the late Moshe-Pinchas' family, the decline of Shlomo's health and his refusal to act as a chief rabbi in his old hometown are all plot fragments that bespeak a shattered, fragmentary composition.

Thus, the deterioration of Shlomo's authority is piously mirrored in the compositional layer, which widens the seemingly unbridged gulf between the story's two halves. Another difficulty is that as long as Moshe-Pinchas lived, Shlomo's other adversaries didn't dare threaten him. A strong support for Shlomo could easily have been raised. But once this support,

Moshe-Pinchas, was no longer available, the opponents of Shlomo mysteriously began to offend and insult him.

The nature of this enigmatic paradox challenges the reader to decode its concealed rationale. Accordingly, this paradox is the clue to solving the riddle of the perplexing relationships between the story's parts. The reciprocity evoked by two adversary forces engaged in a perpetual conflict produces a balanced parallelogram of forces, which is related in both thematic and compositional strategies of the story's first part. But when Moshe-Pinchas passed away, the tightly balanced parallelogram of forces is nullified. This parallelogram's nullification earns a literary reflection in the story's second part: the well-coordinated theme and composition that characterize the story's first part are countered by a fragmentary theme and composition in the story's second part. The splintered theme and composition of the story's second part flows from the ending of the story's first part—Moshe-Pinchas' death, which upsets the parallelogram of forces. Hence, the story's unity is dexterously maintained by a causal mending of its two parts. The story's seemingly disparate parts generate a solid integrity: one plus one makes one. The aesthetic features of a literary work of art may inform its ideological message. The bisected portrait of the story presents two polar positions in an ageless conflict that everlastingly haunts human life. The conflict may manifest itself as embittered, mordant, caustic, and yet somehow impressively august, like the conflict between Shlomo and Moshe-Pinchas in the story's first part. On the other hand, the conflict may manifest itself as mean-spirited, loathsome and ignominious, like the conflict inflamed by Shlomo's impertinent rivals in the story's second part. The pattern of everlasting human conflict is the constant; the variable is the specific human expression of those engaged in the conflict.

In this vein, the halved portrait of the story aims to portray the essence of *la condition humaine*; it draws together the potential, different poles of the eternal human conflict—the lofty and the base. As in the previously examined story, the first impression of a remissly patched composition does not lead one astray in vain: it draws the reader's attention to the aesthetic and ideological undercurrents of the piece. Agnon's befuddling turn of the compositional screw is highly shrewd indeed.

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