MEMOIR

An Afternoon with Agnon

A Face to Meet the Faces

BARUCH HOCHMAN

In the summer of 1967 I spent some time with S. Y. Agnon. Agnon had just received the Nobel Prize for literature, and I was in Jerusalem to work on a study of his fiction. A friend offered to put me in touch with him and suggested we practice a small deception in doing so. The master, he said, was leery of critics, but might be pleased to meet someone who could help with the English correspondence that had been provoked by the Nobel. I was uncomfortable with the ploy, but went along with it.

For better and worse, my meetings with Agnon were colored by our subterfuge. I take it that Agnon not only sensed the trick, but played it for all it was worth. The result was a fascinating set of visits that taught me more about Agnon than I would ever have expected to learn. What I glimpsed had to do, not only with the man, but with the work.

My first encounter, which lasted six hours or so, established all the motifs of my subsequent meetings with him and cast a curious light on Agnon's writing, partaking as it did of both its near-obsessive playfulness and its governing preoccupations. It is that visit, its oddnesses and the chain of reflections it triggered in me, that will concern me here.

Even the preparations for the visit were encumbered with oddness. The friend who had arranged my visit had told the Agnons to expect me at four. Another friend insisted on driving me there. She said she was doing so out of self-interest, since "there's no one in Jerusalem so interesting, so much fun, as the Old Man."

That made for a dilemma, and a characteristically Agnonic one at that. How could I, an unknown and invited guest, turn up with an uninvited guest? My friend, whose name was Lea, insisted it would be all right, that she and the "Old Man" had known each other since time immemorial, and had evolved a sufficiently jocular relationship to absorb the anomaly.

Still, more than a little nervous, I phoned. The conversation was odd. It hinged on nomenclature—on how you refer to whom—and therefore on the possible displacements of emphasis, role, and meaning that naming entails. As I talked to Agnon, it immediately became clear that I was being cast as "Mr. Baruch" and the "Old Man" as plain "Agnon." He would permit no "mister" to be appended to his name, and no other form of address was available. So Mr. Baruch, the wandering scribe, so eager to help with the mail, was to grace plain Agnon with his presence, and he was to do so in the company of a person known as "The Lady," and not with his old friend Lea, as most of the world referred to her. "Ah," said Agnon, cagey in his plainness. "The Lady? You want to come with The Lady? Of course The Lady can bring you. I'm always delighted to see The Lady."

It was startling, to hear Lea referred to as The Lady. Lea was a rangy, rawboned woman of about fifty-five, whose elusive girlishness was masked by the manner of the brusque British journalist. Lea worked as a newspaper editor, and she came on, often in Oxfords and tweeds, as an utter "original": an odd and passionately Zionist Englishwoman in the

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Middle East, picking her way among its perplexities. She was, in the end, a very great lady, but there was little that was ladylike, in the ordinary sense, about her.

Agnon not only referred to Lea as "The Lady," but played his relation to her ladyship to the hilt, and he did so to the exclusion of almost everything else, including me. Lea was notoriously unpunctual, but that afternoon she timed things to perfection. We drove up to Agnon's house on the stroke of four, to find a gallant but ironically abashed old man standing at a rusty gate, with a sprig of rosemary in his hand. "For the lady," he said, with mock Old World courtesy, and proceeded to acknowledge me—Mr. Baruch—with still more pronounced courtliness, as he ushered us into the house.

The house was shocking: shockingly ugly, shockingly stark, anomalous. On the whole, Jerusalem is built in stone and has a stony grace. The stone, at its most valued, is pinkish beige, and it is generally coaxed into pleasing shapes, with occasional touches of the arabesque. Since 1918, building in stone has been mandatory; before that there was no real choice. But there have been years when housing was short, so that permits were issued to build in stucco. Agnon's house had been built in such a year. It is a dingy dun color, with grim casement windows and the general shape of the "Taggard Fortresses" that the British built to pacify the country in times of riot. And though it stands in Talpiot, on the southeastern extremity of the town, where there are splendid views of distant mountains, tawny wilderness, and—afar—the Dead Sea, the house itself seems blind. Surrounded by dour cypresses, their plumage drooping, it orients itself to nothing.

What I saw of its interior matched the face it presented to the world. Agnon, still dancing attendance, ushered us into a room that, despite its fairly good size and pleasant proportions, seemed to have been displaced from one of the Orthodox East European quarters of the city. Against one wall stood a wooden wardrobe. A rectangular wooden table, with some chairs, stood in the center of the room, and another, smaller table against a wall. On the wall hung a framed map (or was it a photograph? I don't remember) of the Old City of Jerusalem, which had been restored to Israeli sovereignty—we tended to say "liberated"—in the course of the Six Day War about a month before. The one patch of color, or decoration in the ordinary sense, was provided by a shoulder-high, bright yellow-glazed tile stove such as I had never seen but knew was characteristic of Jewish homes in Eastern Europe.

Agnon asked me to be seated and signified the name, which I didn't catch, of a woman with a shy smile and a radiant, weathered face who was hovering in the room. The woman was his wife, though it seems to me that he didn't say so just then. She seemed pleasant but abashed, and she fidgeted about on her feet, not joining the conversation but not quite relinquishing it either. The conversation was desultory and chiefly had to do with refreshment. What would we drink? Juice? Tea? Coffee? Brandy?—Coffee? Well, he would fetch some, but would The Lady be kind enough to accompany him to the kitchen and give him a hand?

Quickly, Agnon, with Lea in tow, disappeared. Alone with Mrs. Agnon, I contemplated the strangeness of the setting. What was strangest was not the bareness—the barrenness, in fact—but rather the incoherence, not only of the room but also of the human transactions, such as they were, that were being performed in it. The plainness, the homeliness, the formlessness of it all was weirdly at odds with the man's work. Agnon's work is a miracle of restrained elegance; his stories are crafted with an architect's instinct for form. Only their classic restraint saves them from an almost dandified fussiness, such as peers out of old photographs of him, dating from the teens and twenties of the century.

What to make, then, of this deliberate eschewal of ordinary amenity, of every sign of ordering form? Partly, I supposed, it was a rejection of fussiness, of middle-class amenity—that is, of *balabatishkeit*, of the house-proud householderliness of a characteristically East European kind; partly, I thought, it must have been identification, not only with the shtetl, the small town, of his boyhood, but also with an older *yishuv*, with a mode of living—literally, of *settlement*—that had prevailed in *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, within living memory. Indeed, it was in part a throwback to something even I had glimpsed in remote corners of Israel, where people lived as they had lived thirty or forty years

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before and struggled to go on living in that way. But it was odd in Agnon, who figured—who still figures—as the most urbane of Israel's writers.

But then everything was to be odd that day, and the house, like so many other things, resisted clear explanation. One of the day's oddnesses was the length of time it took for the coffee to be made. It proceeded, the coffee making, with much clatter and occasional wisps of conversation. I sat there—it must have been forty minutes at least—until Agnon, with Lea alongside of him, reappeared. In that time, I had ample leisure to ponder the strangeness of the setting, the oddness of my reception, the unforeseen intimacy that Agnon seemed to be cultivating with my friend—and the distant loveliness of Mrs. Agnon, who had hovered tenuously in the room all that time.

Indeed, by the time Agnon appeared, I'd managed to engage Mrs. Agnon in conversation. The conversation was brief, bewildering, and painful, and it turned on a matter of time. As she stood below the map of Old Jerusalem, I asked—making conversation—if she'd been there. "Where?" she asked. "In the Old City," I said. "Oh, yes," said she. "I've been there all right—in '28 . . . I mean 1912. . . . But maybe it was before the War of Liberation. . . . You must forgive me. I've been in the Old City, but I think I can't quite tell you when. You see," she went on, with devastating lucidity, "I'm not very good about time."

It was clear that Mrs. Agnon was somewhat senile. She seemed to regard her condition as a fact not to be suppressed, or even to be embarrassed about. It seemed evident that it was beyond the power of mere senility to cloud the radiance of her native intelligence or to shake her essential poise, which seemed undaunted by age or distance or forgetting. She seemed a "clear" of the first water, and her dimness figured as the most transparent element in the scene.

Her husband was another kettle of fish. His materialization, with Lea at his side, was bizarre and rife with artifice. Both of them stood there in the doorway, each with tray in hand. Lea's tray, I was startled to see, was an old, oval cast-aluminum object, such as my grandmother had kept on her dressing table, with mirrored back and railing all around, for combs, brushes, and hairpins; his tray was a warped brass Middle-Eastern coffee server. The trays were piled crazy-quilt-high, with cups, saucers, sugar, creamer, finjan, brandy bottle, and glasses. Each looked like a prop for some deliberately comic improvization, to be rushed by some zany clown onto some safe surface, in the name of whole cups, unsmashed crockery, and psychic equilibrium.

But rush was just what he didn't do. Instead, he arrested himself in mid-motion and coolly addressed himself to me. "You know, Mr. Baruch," he said in a quiet singsong, "I was just talking to The Lady—I was just remembering," he said, as his tower of crockery teetered, tottered, almost crashed. "I was just remembering how, one balmy Saturday morning—Oh, more years ago than I care to remember—it must have been in the early thirties—one balmy Sabbath morning, I was sitting outside, in the late morning, and, looking up from my book, I saw, coming over the crest of the next hill, a pair of horsemen. Who could be coming to see me, I thought, on horseback, this unlikely Saturday morning? So they galloped nearer and nearer," he went on, with a querulous wriggle of his left hand and a Zero Mostel-like flourish of his left heel, as I dizzily eyed the tray of crockery teetering at the edge of the table, "until—would you believe it?—I saw my friend ——— on the one horse and, on the other, The Lady! And Oh! Mr. Baruch! She was so lovely, Mr. Baruch, so very lovely—you would not have believed how lovely."

There was something in Agnon's final tilting of the situation, after his consummately clownish buildup, that got to me. On the face of it, he was paying Lea a high compliment. But I was fed up; some contentious bone in my body led me to throw out, aggressively: "I bring a woman to your house, Agnon . . . I bring a woman to your house, and you tell me she *was* lovely!" I was at that point violating both the letter and the spirit of the situation, and I knew it. Lea had in fact "brought" me, and in any case the twenty or so years she had on me—she was in her mid-fifties and I was visibly much her junior—ordinarily prevented people from thinking of us in that way. But Agnon, having sounded the note of contention, rose to the occasion. "Oh, Mr. Baruch," said he, after a blank moment, pondering—"Oh, Mr. Baruch," he said, gesticulating vaguely. "She's lovely enough, lovely enough now, too—lovely, that is, for her age, for her years."

Lea, who had insisted she was coming along for the sheer fun of it and who tended to revel in the unlikely, the unpredictable, just beamed. Beauty was something she would rather be caught dead with than be caught preening herself on. Knowing that I knew that, she seemed doubly amused to have me enter the lists for her, and on those grounds. In any case, who could have resisted the spectacle of two such oddly assorted males locking horns about her loveliness? Beyond that, I felt that she was savoring the *chutzpah,* the *temerity,* I had mustered on her behalf, twitting the old boy in the idiom of a gallantry that his spectral Old World manner suggested. Nor could she have failed to savor the clownish wit with which he had wriggled out of the corner he had boxed himself into.

Bristling with amusement, the good Lea moved in, and did so with uncharacteristic housewifeliness. She insisted that Agnon put down his tray and let her organize the coffee. She had to get to work; because of her editorial chores, she had to get to the office by six, and she was determined to have the coffee she'd been promised, with whatever chat she might feast upon. So we sat, chatting about this and that: the coffee, its modes of preparation, the Nobel, Stockholm, Nelly Sachs, with whom Agnon had shared the prize that year.

What was stupefying about that afternoon, as it unfolded, was not its unlikely length—it went on for six stunning hours, well into the evening—nor its curious changes of guard, nor the oscillations of attitude, such as Agnon had shown toward Lea, but rather the number of variations Agnon played on the theme of lost beauty, as touched upon in that moment of reminiscence about Lea, and by my provocative retort.

Agnon was seeing Lea out when the next round of visitors turned up. It consisted of a fairly well known American journalist and his lovely Swedish wife. They had come to render homage to the Master, bringing pictures taken at the Nobel ceremony in Stockholm seven months before, and a chance to chew over their experience there. The wife—tall, blond, handsome, and visibly not Jewish—was received by Agnon with the same flutter of Old World gallantry as Lea, but more so. This round of mock-courtliness was the more comic partly because it was conducted in a kind of warped Galician German, which roundly declared its uneasiness in the speaker's mouth, and partly because the young woman was not inured to its ironic nuances. Watching the choreography of this odd courtliness, I again—as with Lea—had the sense that I was watching a comedy of wrenched manners, with the manners abducted from a variety of contexts, and parodied in a variety of styles. The pudgy old master, bowing over the hand of the willowy young woman, surely could not have been seriously *gnädige Frau*-ing her. There was charm in the manner, and even grace. But it was the charm of parody, rendering the whole code arbitrary; the formality of manner seemed only a pretext for fumbling around her skirts.

There was parody, too, as he leafed through the photographs and exclaimed, "Oh! But this surely can't be you, my gracious young lady! This surely cannot be you! You're no less lovely, now . . . but so much older—and in only seven short months! Have you been indisposed, my dear? Have you suffered?" he asked with exquisite solicitude. "It must have been something awful that passed over you. Are you well? Are you happy?" The young lady fidgeted; only her husband's whispered assurances restored her composure, so that she could acknowledge the sharp-eyed gnome who lavished attention upon her and assure him that all was well with her.

And so we went on with the pictures: Nelly Sachs, the Swedish royal family, the presentation of the award. Calling attention to one of the photos, Agnon noted, with an air of astonishment, "And my old lady, look at her there. Such dignity. Such grace. Old woman that she is, even the doormen knew she was a lady—treated her like a princess. I don't know why. They must have seen the vestiges of the loveliness which once was hers." Mrs. Agnon seemed oblivious of both the compliment and the slight, so that, after a glance at her, he proceeded, with a flourish, to tell us a tale. The journalist and his wife were getting themselves together to go, but they *had* to hear this tale, this unlikely tale . . . this tale of great embarrassment such as he had rarely experienced before. You see, one day he—the Mas-

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ter, Agnon—had run into a neighbor of his, waiting for the bus. "Well, I didn't know that neighbor all that well. But I knew his wife. And seeing the two together, I figured it must have been him. So I said 'Hello,' said 'How are you?' and exchanged a few words. Next morning, to my amazement—I hadn't seen him for years—I saw the same man again. His wife wasn't there. I said to him, 'My, I was surprised to see your wife. She's changed so much.' 'My wife? Changed?' said he. 'Yes,' I said. 'Has she been ill? Has suffering overtaken her?' 'No,' he said, embarrassed. 'Not at all. That's not the wife you knew. I divorced her three years ago, and this is my new one.' "

And so on. After the lovely young woman and her husband had left, we had a glass of brandy and again chatted about this and that, Mrs. Agnon chiming in from time to time. Then more people came—I can't remember just who—but none of them, Agnon said, was the acquaintance he'd hoped I would meet, a Mister So-and-so, rather well known for his work, a Mister So-and-so whose wife was more than ordinarily interesting as well. About the wife, he said nothing in particular, but in that setting, in the context of all that talk of once-lovely women, the mere mention of her husband's name, of her very existence, sent lights flashing in my head. That wife was a woman I had once known quite well, and she had once (and forever!) bobbed her lovely humpy nose, cropped her mane of jet black hair, and forgone an ancient, haunting name, and all for the love of that very man, well known for his work, who couldn't stand her nose or her name or her hair!

It was marvelous, and maddening, but also tedious how often that day the Master touched on his theme of marred beauty. It hovered, almost palpably, in the air, as we ate supper together—Agnon, his wife, and I—in their kitchen, with Agnon serving the meager, characteristically Israeli evening repast of cheese and yogurt, bread, jam, and tea, and recalling bygone days, when his wife (still lovely?) could still do the honors herself; as I sorted a basket of mail with him, playacting the efficient amanuensis, the kind helper, and serving to bring to his mind some bits of lost wisdom his grandfather had bestowed on him; as he walked me to the number seven bus, so that I could make my way back to the safety of home, in town. And it hovers with me now. It was maddening, how it kept coming at me, like leering gargoyles in the tracery of a Gothic choir. As I watched it loom and weave and hover, it became increasingly clear to me that the mail we had "sorted" together had been sorted before—that the pretext of having me help him with his correspondence was as much a blind on his side as on mine. As the patterns of the day's encounters emerged, it seemed to me that the rationale of my visit with him—and his with me—was not those letters, but some obscure transaction between us that included, not only rival gallantries toward our mutual friend, but also a proliferating tracery of allusions to lost beauty: allusions that echoed each other across some obscure field of meaning.

Later, as I pondered the visit and its elaborate weaving together of the elements of a single motif, I found it hard to fathom what it was all about. At one level, Agnon's performance was surely triggered by Lea's presence, by something in Lea's relation to me—or mine to her—and by the trick my other friend had conspired with me in playing on him. Yet it seemed to me something more was going on—was at stake—and, in the aftermath, every effort to illuminate the transactions of that strange afternoon only made for further ramifications and involution.

Lea, for example, could provide a certain amount of information, but no explanation. Agnon, it turned out, habitually referred to her as "The Lady," but he had called her that only since he had published a story called "The Lady and the Peddler" some twenty-three years before. That story is about an impecunious Jewish peddler who finds shelter in the ruined castle of a Gentile noblewoman. He becomes her lover, only to discover one night, as she goes for his jugular, that she is a vampire. Lea believed that the story, which is generally taken to be about the Jew in the Gentile world, is also, somehow, in some dimension, about her own mother, a convent-bred English beauty who had converted to Judaism in order to marry Lea's father, who had been the scion of an illustrious rabbinic family, and whose ancestors interested Agnon. Lea thought, moreover, that the whole sequence involving her lost loveliness was at least in part a characteristically Agnonic joke against her and her family. Part of the joke was to refer to her as "The Lady," as he has referred to her mother before her. As for the provocative anecdote about that Saturday morning, long ago, when those two figures on horseback had appeared on the horizon, etc., the telling of it had followed directly on a conversation—the conversation that had filled the heretofore inexplicable forty minutes of coffee making that afternoon—about "certain rumors that had reached" Agnon's ears. Those rumors concerned the very gentleman with whom she had materialized on horseback some thirty-five years before. That gentleman, to whom she had been engaged at the time, was said to be in the process of divorcing his wife in order to take up with her—with Lea—again!

It *was* a curious pattern that emerged from Lea's fleshing out of the imaginative background of Agnon's ambiguous compliment. The lady who had been, beyond present belief, so lovely and therefore doubtless so lovable, but who had lost her lover nonetheless, was about to have him restored to her, even in her present condition. And that lady's mother, who had in fact been indisputably a beauty, even in hoary age, was in fact not a beauty but a bloodsucker, like the lady in Agnon's story, and this was so despite her transformation from Gentile to Jew, and despite her long sojourn in the Holy Land.

Lea's playful evocation of the strands of personal history that may have woven themselves into Agnon's tantalizing network of allusions was useful. Yet it did not begin to elucidate the relentless patterning of motifs Agnon had achieved that afternoon or the behavior that had accompanied them. Ordinarily, I must confess, I would have been disposed to take the enactment, with its reiterated theme of lost beauty, as a super-subtle old man's way of dealing with his own grief and rage at the ravages of time. Agnon was, after all, crowding eighty, and other meetings—like one, some weeks later, when he cried out, on learning that I'd come with a young woman, "Oh! My dear! And I haven't shaved!"—suggested that he habitually parodied the outrage of a ladies' man at being, alas, out of the fray. His wife, moreover, was a bit older than he. Though she was markedly eroded by age, the very survival in her of both bearing and beauty must have exacerbated his sense of time and loss—the more so in view of the liver-spotted pudginess of his own person and the comic hotchpotch of his manner.

I had no doubt that what I had witnessed was in part just such a response by an old man to age, to time, to change, and to the losses they bring. Female pulchritude was the manifest theme, and it recurred in contexts of time, of change, of loss. But the direction that change took seemed wayward and suggested other preoccupations. Ladies could become vampires as well as old hags; but in the fullness of time, the haggard and haggish could, with a comic flourish, have restored to them the lovers who had presumably loved them for loveliness alone, and not for their blessed souls. Who knows, I found myself thinking, whether in a world where such transformations are possible, Agnon himself might not have been transformable, in his own imagination at least, into a young faun, much as Lea and I had been tilted—had been, in a manner of speaking, transformed—by Agnon's own trick of naming, into the peculiar constellation of roles we had enacted?

But something more than compensatory fantasy and primitive wish-fulfillment was surely involved, I felt. Neither Agnon's manner nor his glimpsed meanings lent themselves to such reduction; everything insisted that something more complex was at work. Among other things, what needed to be understood was not only the insistent yet elusive substance of his enactment, but also the form it took: the pleasure he seemed to find in embroidering his theme, and the wily impishness, however masked, with which he wielded it against his victims. Indeed, on further reflection, the way he shaped his material, combined with the substance of what engaged him, brought to mind decisive aspects of his work. In fact, the impulses that governed the comedy of deliberate recurrence that day seemed intricate enough to serve as a kind of brief abstract and epitome of his entire life's work.

Agnon's work can be seen as a vast elegiac, but also ironic, contemplation of loss. His first major story, published in 1908, when he was nineteen, centered on the pathos of star-crossed lovers, who yearn toward each other across an abyss of hopelessness, of loss. The story was called "Agunot," from the plural of the word *aguna*, which designates an abandoned woman, or a woman whose husband has disappeared without divorcing her, but

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who cannot be proven dead. Since Jewish law holds that a woman cannot remarry until she is either certified a widow or is properly divorced, and since divorce must be granted by an available husband, lost and absent husbands meant lifelong desolation, a kind of living death, tormented by endless longing, for the wives. Given the vicissitudes of Jewish life in the Diaspora, the *aguna* was a ubiquitous presence, a haunting symbol of unassuagable loss. Agnon, whose family name was originally Czaczkes, took that name when he published that story. "Agnon" thereafter served as his nom de plume—and his lifelong handle, the name by which everyone, even his wife, addressed him.

The taking of that name was no caprice; it was in fact a sort of prognostication of the governing concerns of his fiction. Those concerns all too quickly—some would say tragically—shifted from the personal to the historic. The loss that in "Agunot" seemed largely sentimental and romantic becomes, in the course of Agnon's creative lifetime, a communal nightmare. That nightmare involved the disappearance of the traditional East European Jewish world, first through cultural erosion and then by means of the violence directed against it in the Holocaust. A good part of Agnon's work is sustained by the impulse to contemplate, memorialize, and lament the passing of that world, whose decline had begun before Agnon's birth in 1889 and whose final resolution into oblivion was achieved by Hitler's Final Solution. Agnon's novel *A Guest for the Night* deals directly with the confrontation by a first-person narrator very much like Agnon himself with the disintegration of his Galician hometown, which—like Agnon—the narrator had left many years before. Published in 1939, *A Guest for the Night* may be taken as an anguished prelude to, if not a prophecy of, the Holocaust.

Loss, personal and communal, is pivotal, but so—as in the curious enactment I had witnessed at the Agnons' that afternoon in 1967—are transformations and redemptions. Agnon's work is full of transformations, of unlikely, often grotesque changes, but also of miraculous restorations. There are lissome girls who are transformed into sleep-logged beauties and then into runners who win their lovers as they race by the light of the moon; there is a pervasive lulling of men, young and old, but especially young, to distant music and the lure of absent women; there is even, in *A Guest for the Night*, the dreamlike transposition of a ruined House of Study to the land of Israel.

Operatively, the cultural loss that is the manifest concern of so much of his work, has its analogue—or, as I would wish to suggest, its source—in the loss that mere growth or movement or change must bring. Correlative with the partings, the separations, the loss, however, there is the meaningless movement of life itself, like the movement of the wind that, in the King James rendering of Ecclesiastes, "bloweth as it listeth." But always, again, there is for Agnon harmonization into form, where ghostly presences may bestow ambiguous peace on protagonists—peace that is ambiguous because of the way it mocks itself, because of the way that Agnon and his language relentlessly mock themselves.

Self-mockery is pervasive, generated by the irony that informs the work everywhere—even the work that deceptively presents itself as naive. The irony stems from what I take to be a cruel cast of mind that must perpetually mock what it most prizes. It is a kind of romantic irony that cuts down whatever it idealizes. Agnon's stories again and again evoke some deeply desired reality, only to shatter it in one way or another. So deep is the irony that the storyteller himself constantly subverts himself. Indeed, the personality—or the mask—of the storyteller in the fiction is not very different from the self-mocking, self-parodying figure I met that day in Jerusalem, the figure that so cunningly regaled his impromptu audience with so many and such grotesque references to lost beauty during the encounter that is the occasion for this essay.

No less striking, as I pondered the relation between my visit and his work, was that his fiction, like his performance that day, is marked by an insistent patterning, within which one image, one situation, one kind of relationship, repeats itself in a way that sometimes seems endless. All literary texts do this, but some do it more than others. If I were to try to place Agnon in the context of other modern writers, I would say that his stories are even more richly textured than Faulkner's, but probably somewhat less so than Joyce's.

The Hebrew text of "Agunot," for example, is probably less than four thousand words long, but it mirrors its governing motifs to seeming infinity. "Agunot" centers on Dinah, who loves Uriel, but comes to marry Yehezkel, who loves Friedel, and is hopelessly loved by her. But it also concerns Uriel, who loves his art, which is epitomized by the Ark of the Law that he makes, and that symbolizes the holiness of the Law itself. It has, too, the Law itself, which the People of Israel cannot adhere to but passionately crave. And it has the People of Israel, exiled from the Land of Israel, from Jerusalem, and yearning for it, even as it has the traditional Congregation of Israel and God, yearning for each other in the language of the Song of Songs, where the Shunammite so eloquently yearns for her lover, and her lover longs for her. But it has the Shechinah—the Holy Spirit as indwelling presence—too, who coos longingly for the People of Israel, who have been driven out from under its wings. And it has an old rabbi, who exiles himself from Jerusalem to wander in a kind of limbo, trying to mend the flaw in the fragmented world, which is symbolized by the experience of all the bereaved souls—the *agunot*—that fill it.

All this was suggested to me by the texture of my visit that afternoon. It was strange and wonderful how a piece of Agnon's imaginative world, as transfused into my own imaginative life through the medium of his work—and then in the medium of his enactment that afternoon in Jerusalem—kept tracking back on itself, producing and reproducing its structures and its themes.

In itself, it strikes me now, reflecting back on the reflections stirred by my visit, there was nothing surprising in this. Agnon's repeated washing back to a crucial set of issues—wishes, fears, obsessions—could be taken as a kind of paradigm for the workings of the writer's mind, which are, after all, no more than the workings of the human mind, any mind. Any single hour on the analyst's couch is likely to produce patterns very like the ones that Agnon generated that day; the only advantage the writer enjoys over other men is the ability to intensify and redeem such patterns by turning them into art. Literary criticism as well as psychoanalysis thrives on the mind's propensity for compulsive pattern making. Every artist, we tend to believe, has a set of characteristic obsessions, and everything he creates circles around these obsessions. We tend to ask not whether a writer has a governing obsession, but rather what it is and how it weaves into the work that is a vehicle for it. We tend not to rank artists by their capacity to free themselves from their obsessions and to engage the world as it is. Rather, we tend to value them for the range of elements (including language) from the world outside that they can pull into the current of their obsessiveness and integrate more or less effectively into their work.

In this perspective, what I was "getting" from Agnon that afternoon was one of many possible epitomizations of issues that dominate his art, but presumably his life as well: issues having to do with his peculiar personal sense of time and loss and recovery of what has been lost. What remains hard to grasp is why the whole thing had happened. Had Agnon sensed who I was—namely, a literary-critical clown, and a wickedly reductive one at that—and why I was there, so that he had reason to put me on? And if so, to what end? To parody my anticipated interpretations of his work? Or to point me to such interpretations—to intimate, in Henry James's image, the figure in his carpet? Or had it just been a tic, a twitch of embarrassment—or of irritation, at my rivalrous stance vis-à-vis Lea—that led to a heaping up of habitual motifs? And was he embarrassed afterwards, or tickled pink?

I don't know, and I never will. The question here, as elsewhere, is more interesting than the answer. What strikes me now, looking back on that visit and subsequent reflection upon it, is that I had witnessed something essential about Agnon. That something had to do with the paradox of the relation between the richness with which his material elaborated itself in his work and the relative paucity of those materials in themselves. This too may be true of all artists, that wealth is an offshoot of poverty and arises from assiduous cultivation of a more or less narrow, more or less interesting set of preoccupations.

About Agnon himself, it also strikes me that part of the process of generating the effect he achieved, both in life—if that visit was typical of anything—and in art, had to do with a teasing, with a playful nagging at his material, with an impulse to turn and turn again—an

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ironic *hafoch ba v'hafoch ba* (the rabbinic phrase for delving into the deepest mysteries of the Torah, to dislodge its all-encompassing truth, by turning over, and again turning over its every jot and every tittle)—what he held in the palm of his hand, till it took shape, till it found its sustaining form. With him, the turning was a teasing both of the material and of the person to whom the material was addressed, whether that person was a reader, or our friend Lea, or a gullible stranger like myself. That teasing, with its comical, sometimes self-abasing component, somehow managed to turn itself into mastery. Indeed, for me the main effect of Agnon's performance that day was the sense of a struggle for mastery—of the effort to stabilize the flux of experience, perhaps of time itself, and of the price in clownishness that he paid for such mastery as he achieved.

In fact, one of the things that struck me that summer, as I met with Agnon, was how costly, how tenuous, yet how remarkable that mastery was. The consensus among Agnon watchers is that in the last years of his life—he died early in 1970—he turned himself into a monument, reifying as mask the face that had once been his and that had once been projected, more or less spontaneously, as persona in his fiction. That, I realized later, was why his manner, like his gallant manners, had the effect of parody, of pastiche, of palimpsest. But overlaid though he was, to the point of encrustation, and inscribed with the fixities of posture and manner, his entire performance bespoke a vulnerability, even an openness—if not to experience, then to hurt and to exposure. That, I think, is what generated the bewildering encounter I have set down here. Presumably, it is out of such vulnerability, yoked to genius, that he created the marvelous cloud towers of his art—and the sometimes bizarre configuration of the face he in fact presented to the world.