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# *What Flaubert Taught Agnon*

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Agnon and Flaubert: the conjunction is, at first blush, altogether unlikely. Their background and the kind of language in which each wrote could scarcely have been more different.

Agnon, the commanding figure in Hebrew fiction in the twentieth century and the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1966, grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home in Buczacz, Galicia, in the eastern end of the Hapsburg Empire. Yiddish was his first language, and he wrote a few stories and some poems in Yiddish when he was in his teens. He had no formal general education, but his mother read the classics of German literature with him, for German was the language

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of cultural prestige under the Hapsburgs, even where, as in Galicia, it was not the vernacular. In any case, the focus of his early education was on traditional Hebrew and Aramaic texts — the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, Midrash, and the plethora of commentaries on all four of those hallowed works. He decisively turned from Yiddish to Hebrew because Hebrew was for him, as he wrote in one of his stories, “the language of all the generations that had gone before us and all the generations to come.” In keeping with this idea of the eternity of the language, the Hebrew that he wrote was essentially the Hebrew of the early rabbis in idiom, lexicon, and grammar, though it exhibited some elements of later strata of the language — but very few from modern Hebrew. To invoke a counter-factual analogue, it would strain the imagination to think of Flaubert writing in the French of the medieval *fabliaux*.

One must add that Agnon, with scant exceptions, was repeatedly coy and evasive about his relation to European writers. He like to present himself as a traditional Hebrew teller of tales, which sometimes he was. The often proposed link with Kafka — especially after Agnon began writing dreamlike or surrealist stories in the 1930s — is a case in point. When he was asked, in an interview at the Schocken Library in Jerusalem after he received the Nobel Prize, whether he was influenced by Kafka, he was clearly nettled. “Kafka? Kafka?” he replied. “I have barely read one book by him.” (But how many books, after all, did Kafka write?) Then he added, archly, “Of course, my wife has the complete writings of Kafka on her shelf.”

Agnon came to Palestine toward the end of his teens, in 1908, and stayed in the port city of Jaffa. During this time, adapting to the secular Zionist milieu there, he abandoned religious observance. In 1913 he went to Germany, evidently

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with the intention of immersing himself in European culture as an autodidact — reading through all the books in a large library, as he extravagantly claimed to Gershom Scholem, who became his friend during his German sojourn. At some point in this period, he returned to Orthodox practice, which he would maintain until the end of his life. Scholem shrewdly observed in an interview on Israeli television after the writer's death that art was paramount for Agnon and that he was attached to religion because it served his purposes as an artist, his outward devotion to ritual and Jewish law confirming, among other things, the finely crafted rabbinic prose in which he wrote.

Early during his decade in Germany that ended with a return to Palestine, Agnon discovered Flaubert. On December 17, 1916, in a letter to Zalman Schocken, the department store magnate who had become his patron, he wrote: "Flaubert and everything about him touch me deeply. He is a poet who mortified himself in the tent of poetry.... It is fitting for every writer to read about him before he writes and after he writes. Then no book would be blighted." (All the translations from the Hebrew and the French are mine.) Note that he speaks of reading *about* Flaubert, not of reading him. The phrase, "mortified himself in the tent of poetry," plays on the rabbinic "mortified himself in the tent of Torah," suggesting a certain equivalence between the two, that is, between the devotion to the sacred text and the devotion to art. In calling the French writer a "poet," Agnon is thinking of the German *Dichter*, which can refer to anyone using language creatively.

The allusion to the French writer's biography reflects one important way in which Flaubert was important for him. The stories that he had written in Jaffa certainly evinced a prodigious talent, but the lyric prose used for them was

often excessively florid. Flaubert, with the many hundreds of draft pages that he honed down to the compact masterpiece that was *Madame Bovary*, showed Agnon what a serious writer needed to do. In fact, during his German years, Agnon took many of the stories that he had written during the first six years of his career and extensively pruned them — with a Flaubertian discipline, one might say. In a few instances he reduced an effusive paragraph to a single telling sentence of six or seven words. The result was beautifully concise fiction of the first order of originality.

Yet it is inconceivable that Agnon would not have read *Madame Bovary* and in all likelihood *Trois contes*, or *Three Tales*, though perhaps not *The Sentimental Education*, arguably Flaubert's most original book. His closest connection with Flaubert is his novel *A Simple Story*, published in 1935. Four years earlier, the first Hebrew translation of *Madame Bovary*, by the short-story writer Devorah Baron, had appeared, and after his early acquaintance with the German version Agnon surely would have at least leafed through it and probably read it all the way through. Thus, as he began work on *A Simple Story*, Flaubert's novel would have been relatively fresh in his mind. The connection between the two books has been duly noticed in Hebrew criticism, which for the most part emphasizes themes and social setting. What may be more instructive in regard to the cross-fertilization between literatures is to consider what Agnon may have picked up from Flaubert about the novelistic representation of experience.



*A Simple Story*, set in the first decade of the twentieth century in a town much like Buczacz, is pre-eminently a novel of bourgeois

life. It is Agnon's most perfectly wrought novel, though in regard to breadth of concerns and to formal innovation not necessarily his greatest. Although the protagonist, Hirshel Hurvitz, and his parents, Baruch Meir and Tsirl, are Orthodox Jews (we see him, for example, attending daily worship), this is no more than an external expression of their culture, for their lives are through-and-through bourgeois. The Hurvitzes are the owners of a general store, and the accumulation of wealth is their main preoccupation.

At the beginning of the book, a relative named Bluma Nacht ("Night Flower") shows up in their home to throw herself on their mercies after losing both her parents. The mercies prove to be far from tender as the domineering Tsirl, a habitual driver of hard bargains, agrees to allow Bluma to stay as a household servant without salary, only room and board provided. Tsirl immediately casts doubt on Bluma's competence for the job, but it quickly emerges that, having maintained her parents' home while her mother was failing, she is a skilled cook and baker and adept at keeping a household clean and orderly. At the time Hirshl is just sixteen, and Bluma is presumably about the same age. The two are drawn to each other in an attraction that is powerfully erotic, however discreetly it is intimated by Agnon. When it becomes clear to Tsirl that a serious relationship between them threatens to emerge, she banishes Bluma from the house, for she will not countenance her son, an only child, marrying a penniless relative.

Instead Tsirl arranges a marriage for him with the daughter of a wealthy Jewish farmer. The passive Hirshl submits, but he continues to be obsessed with Bluma. After the wedding he is desperately unhappy with his wife, recoiling from the smell of her perfume, feeling the words that she speaks to him as sharp

nails being driven into his flesh. The birth of a son — as it turns out, the baby is sickly — does not improve matters. Hirshl begins to pay nightly visits to the house in which Bluma is now living. He stands outside in all weathers, dolefully looking up at the window where he imagines the woman he loves is standing. All this compulsive behavior culminates in a severe psychotic breakdown, and his father takes him to the city of Lemberg (Lviv today) for a cure in a residential facility with an eccentric psychiatrist who patiently edges him back to sanity by telling him stories. At the end Hirshl is reconciled with his wife — on the surface, happily, though Agnon hints in the way the conclusion is framed that this is not really a happy ending.

The plot, of course, is quite different from the plot of *Madame Bovary*, but it shares with the French novel a sense of the pervasive oppressiveness of bourgeois materialism joined with an unhappy marriage and the allure of a romantic connection — for Hirshl, manifestly impossible to realize — outside of marriage. The great nineteenth-century novels are often about lives that end in trainwrecks, and *A Simple Story* conforms to this pattern of the genre in its realist phase, using an oblique, understated version of the concluding disaster.

Agnon obviously did not need Flaubert to fashion a story of this sort. The real-life counterparts to the Hurvitz family and other characters in the book were observed by him when he was growing up in Buczacz, and they would have been sufficient to fuel his imagination. What he could have picked up from Flaubert was certain clues for how to articulate the novelistic representation of such a world.

To begin with, Flaubert exhibited a sure sense of how to pull together the disparate elements of a long narrative through the deployment of recurring motifs. The color blue, for example, is an important thread running through his

novel. When Charles first sees Emma on a sunny summer day, she is holding a blue parasol that casts a blueish (*bleuâtre*) shade on her face. She has blue dresses; her extravagant romantic fantasies unfold against imagined blue horizons. Agnon is quite likely to have noticed the recurring motifs in Flaubert, though he also could have seen them in Thomas Mann. It is a device he employed in most of his novels and in many of his stories. He makes ample use of it in *A Simple Story* through recurrences of food, coins, cigarettes, and many other motifs.

One of the most significant of these is the blind singing beggar. That figure may be directly taken from *Madame Bovary*: Emma, we recall, repeatedly hears the singing of a blind beggar on her departures for her assignations with Léon, her second lover. The moment before she dies, she again hears his song coming from outside her house. Details in literature sometimes draw on multiple sources, and as the Israeli critic Nitza Ben-Dov has persuasively proposed, there is a blind singing beggar in one of the tales of the early nineteenth-century Hasidic master Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav that Agnon surely would have remembered. In *A Simple Story* the blind beggar is associated with the world of song and romantic love that is the antithesis of all the mercantile values that Tsirl promotes, and when Hirshl encounters the singer in rags at the end of the novel, he gets rid of him by tossing to him an unusually large coin — clearly, the coin of his mother's realm. Emma's tragedy is underscored when she perishes from the arsenic that she has swallowed listening in anguish to the beggar's song that has marked her departures for the love affair ending in disaster; Hirshl's more hidden tragedy is to banish with a coin the singer and the dream of love evoked by the song, subsiding into a materialist bourgeois life devoid of melody.

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Flaubert is often identified as the writer who perfected the technique of *le style indirect libre*, uninformatively referred to in English as free indirect style. This simply means the narrator's conveying to us the unspoken speech of the character in the third person, with tenses switched from present (which the character would use to herself) to past. Dorit Cohen, in her luminous book *Transparent Minds*, had a better term for it; she calls it narrated monologue, but since academics prefer rebarbative language, her apt designation never caught on. Agnon made abundant use of free indirect style in *The Hill of Sand*, a brilliant novella that he created through extensive revisions of an earlier story after he came to Germany. The young protagonist is an aspiring poet constantly pulling back from engagement in eros, and Agnon gives a Freudian spin to free indirect style by exposing through the character's unspoken words sexual desires that his conscious mind represses. *Madame Bovary* in fact employs *le style indirect libre* only from time to time, but always with striking effectiveness, and the same is true of *A Simple Story*. Instead Flaubert utilizes a range of different procedures for representing consciousness, and in this, too, Agnon follows suit.

Let us look at a few brief examples of free indirect style from both novels. After her first experience of adulterous love with the libertine aristocrat Rodolphe, Emma returns to her home, and "seeing herself in the mirror, she was amazed by her face. Never had she had eyes so big, so black, nor of such depth. Something subtle spread through her whole being and transfigured it." Everything here about the bigness and blackness and depth of the eyes, her transfiguration, is of course Emma talking to herself, and these sentences are a

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study in self-deception. What Emma sees in the mirror is not her actual image, but her image as she imagines it transfigured by her experience of romantic love. Flaubert then moves from narrated monologue to monologue proper as Emma calls out, “I have a lover! I have a lover!” To this the narrator adds his own analytic comment about Emma’s train of thought, which is devastating through the force of the simile it uses (Agnon, as we shall see, does this, too): “relishing the idea as if at another puberty that had befallen her.”

Now consider two instances of this technique in *A Simple Story*, one involving Tsirl and the other her son. Early in the novel, Tsirl explains to herself why it is legitimate for her to employ Bluma without salary.

Seemingly, a denial of payment was entailed in this, but whoever looks into the heart of the matter sees that Tsirl was right, for when Bluma comes to marry, will Tsirl run around to charities and say, “Provide a dowry my relative”? No, she herself will give according to the years she has served. Besides, what payment could Bluma expect? Why, she had never been a servant to others, and so she has been learning about housework from Tsirl.

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From beginning to end, the passage is an exercise in self-justification. The expression “whoever looks into the heart of the matter” translates as whoever would follow Tsirl’s self-serving train of thought. Tsirl casts herself here as a heroine of generosity in the prospect of eventually paying Bluma the amount that she would have earned through years of labor. The remark, moreover, about her learning housework from Tsirel is a blatant lie to herself. She is in no way involved in housework and knows precious little about how to do it, whereas Bluma

arrives at her home thoroughly experienced and skilled in managing a home.

There is a linguistic complication in this and related passages. Tsirl, of course, is thinking in Yiddish, which Agnon conveys in Hebrew, at most occasionally giving a Yiddish turn to the phrasing, and Tsirl would scarcely have known any Hebrew. The phrase “according to the years she has served” approximately recalls the formulation of the law in the Torah pertaining to the so-called Hebrew slave, actually an indentured servant for a period of seven years. Tsirl is unlikely to have been familiar with the Hebrew of this verse, and so we have a kind of surreptitious intervention of the narrator who is mediating Tsirl’s unspoken speech in Hebrew, an intervention that suggests Tsirl is disposed to regard Bluma as a virtual slave. This biblical echo is a small illustration of how Agnon Hebraizes the Flaubertian technique as he adopts it.

And here is a fairly straightforward deployment of free indirect discourse for Hirshl. The baby boy he has begotten, as I have noted, is sickly. Hirshl, contemplating the ailing newborn, expresses his concern in the following manner: “If Bluma were caring for him, he would regain his strength. And so Hirshl would imagine himself standing on one side of his son and Bluma on the other and his son recovering. God in heaven knows that Hirshl’s sole intention was for the sake of his son.”

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The first sentence is free indirect discourse. The second sentence is the narrator’s report of Hirshl’s imagining. Such switches back and forth in modes of representing thought are a common feature of the technique, as we saw in Flaubert’s move from narrated monologue to actual monologue (“I have a lover!”) to the narrator’s summarizing judgment of what the character feels. Both these sentences here reflect the

lovestruck protagonist's perception, or fantasy, of Bluma as a healer, a comforter, an all-around bestower of blessings. The third sentence slides back into free indirect discourse. "God in heaven knows" is a virtual refrain in this novel, a formula invoked by characters who are actually not paying much attention to God in heaven — who are, one might say, taking His name in vain. Hirshl has to insist that God would confirm the purity of his motives because he guiltily senses that they are really not about concern for the child.

Free indirect discourse is a technique that is particularly effective for exposing self-deception, as it follows the characters talking to themselves while we as readers can see that what they are saying to themselves patently lacks credibility. In the passages I have reviewed, this is clear in Emma's telling herself she has been visibly transfigured through adulterous sex, in Tsirl's congratulating herself on her magnanimity toward her poor relative, and in Hirshl's avowing to himself that his sole concern was to imagine his son getting better while we understand that his imagining is all about Bluma, not about his son. In all these instances, it is evident that free indirect discourse is a beautifully efficient and effective instrument of characterization. We all sometimes tell lies to ourselves for the sake of our own self-regard or to avoid discomfiting thoughts. The novel, with its commitment as a genre to exploring the complexities and contradictions of character, often takes advantage of this technique that deftly achieves precisely the end of representing the ambiguities and the little hypocrisies with which people live. In this regard, free indirect discourse works especially well for characters lacking self-knowledge, which is obviously the case for Emma, for Tsirl, and for Hirshl.

Another way of representing consciousness, in which Flaubert may have been a pioneer, is the visual rather than

the verbal evocation of what is going on in the character's head. Here is Emma, running through a stand of trees, utterly distraught because she has just been abruptly cast aside by Rodolphe: "It seemed to her suddenly that fire-colored globes were bursting in the air like incandescent balls, flattening out and turning, turning, to melt into the snow, among the branches of the trees. In the center of each of them, Rodolphe's face appeared." By now, I suppose that passages like this have come to seem familiar in serious novels, but in the middle of the nineteenth century, when this was written, it was innovative. There is something going on here inside the character's head that is not words, neither the narrator's summary of what someone is thinking or words that the character is saying to herself, but rather a visual sequence of images spinning through that highly distraught head, the evocation of a hallucination.



There is little in the evolution of literature that is entirely new. The technique, for example, of unifying extended stretches of narrative through recurring motifs that we observed in both writers was vividly evident in the Hebrew Bible long before Flaubert invented Emma's blue horizons and Agnon the blind beggar and his song. Think of the significant recurrence of garments, especially ones used for deception, in the Joseph story, or of the reiterated presence of cloaks in the Samuel narrative, from the "little cloak" that his mother would make him every year when he was a priest's acolyte as a young boy to his cloak torn by Saul and turned into a dire symbol by Samuel in his wrathful maturity. Even *le style indirect libre*, so often associated with Flaubert, can be found as far back as

in Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, written in the seventeenth century.

What we see, then, in Flaubert's visual rendering of hallucinatory experience is not an absolute first but a technique with precursors — there are also occasional anticipations of it in Dickens, for example, when a character is drunk or otherwise mentally confused. Flaubert works up this narrative procedure to a fine burnish — those fire-colored globules that seem like incandescent balls, each showing Rodolphe's face to Emma, which is thus the perfect visual representation of a woman's mind maddened by disappointment in love. A recurring motif, moreover, sneaks its way in here: the "turning, turning" is a precise echo of the "turning, turning" of the ball at the La Vaubyssard château that intoxicates and dizzies Emma as we move here from a turning that is a high to a turning that is a low. It also points to the constant turning of the carpenter's lathe in the village where Emma feels trapped. In regard to the visual representation of consciousness, then, it is not that the thing has never been done, but rather that it has never been done so well.

258 As a consummate literary craftsman in his own right, Agnon would very likely have noticed such moments as he read *Madame Bovary*, first in German and probably, much later, in Hebrew. His early fiction does not show instances of this sort of visual representation of the movement of the mind. Let me offer two examples of it in *A Simple Story*. After Hirshl's engagement to Minna, the rich farmer's daughter, has been announced, he attends a Hanukkah party, secular in character, where people are playing cards. As he sits at a table holding his hand of cards while looking at the players around him, this is what runs through his head: "The cards leaped from the hands of the card-players with a strange rapidity, until the

hands could not be seen among them. Finally, the cards, too, disappeared, and black and red faces could be seen in the room, dancing before him and mocking."

This is not an extreme experience of derangement, like that of Emma running through the woods, distraught, desperate, panicked, after her love affair has suddenly collapsed. In fact, it is the sort of thing many of us are likely to have experienced at one time or another. Say you are persuaded by a friend to attend a political debate on a topic that is not of compelling interest to you, or perhaps you don't like such debates in general because you feel they generate more heat than illumination. As the voices of the debaters drone on, your mind begins to drift away from deciphering the meaning of the words, and everything around you dissolves into a cacophony of sounds that might suggest to you a flock of crows emitting their raucous cries. Something of this sort happens to Hirshl in this scene. He does not really want to be at this party. He has not been comfortable with the announcement of his engagement. In fact, he does not really want to marry Minna, but he sees it as a fate imposed on him by his parents that he cannot escape. And so at the card table his mind drifts off from the game, begins to see the cards dealt assuming a phantasmagoric velocity and then detaching themselves from the hands of the players.

Finally the red and black faces on the cards take on a hallucinatory autonomy, staring at him in mockery — in a way, every card is now a joker. Perhaps their mocking gaze reflects Hirshl's sense that he has done something embarrassing, even shameful, in agreeing to marry Minna. At this point in the novel Hirshl still retains his sanity, but the transformation of the cards into ominously derisive faces is a striking adumbration of the moment in which he will

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flip into insanity, running through the forest making the croaking sounds of a frog.

The way-station to that moment is his nightly vigils outside the house where Bluma is staying. Here, too, a visual evocation of consciousness is brought into play: “A veil had fallen over all the world and you can’t even see yourself. But the image of Bluma broke through and rose before you as on the day she caressed your head when you came into her room and she fled and came back.” The veil that has fallen over the world would seem to be both a result of night and fog and the anguished Hirshl’s mental confusion. Through this murky haze, Bluma’s image bursts forth and rises like a sun. That image of rising triggers a memory of the moment that he most cherishes in their unconsummated love, when she caressed his head as he sat on her bed, the only time she actually caressed him. Agnon uses the second person singular in order to bring us more directly into Hirshel’s mind because this is him addressing himself, a variant form of narrated monologue.

The final sentence of this brief passage, “Hirshl rested his head on the handles of the lock,” is a striking instance of how Agnon introduces a Hebraizing element in whatever he may have learned from Flaubert. This is the narrator’s report, so we are no longer inside Hirshl’s head. The lock is the door-lock, indicating that Hirshl is right up against the entry to the house, not looking up at it from a certain distance. The phrase “on the handles of the lock” is a direct quotation of the Song of Songs 5:5. It is one of the most poignant moments in that Biblical book and is beautifully apt for Hirshl’s plight. The beloved in that chapter has teasingly put off her lover’s plea to unlock the door. When she then goes to open it, her hands dripping liquid myrrh onto the lock, for she has perfumed herself for love, she finds that he has gone, and in desperation she runs out into the

dark night streets to try to find him. The resonance between this lover’s despair and the anguish of Agnon’s protagonist is clear — the night, the tears, the seemingly lost lover (though for Hirshl the loss will be unending). As has often been observed, literary Hebrew is a constant echo-chamber, and at strategic junctures Agnon deftly call up a resonant echo. However Flaubertian he may sometimes seem, this is not a resource that Flaubert could have deployed in his French.

Neither novel restricts its treatment of character and theme to the representation of consciousness. Flaubert is particularly good at introducing concise and arresting judgments of his characters, usually through the vehicle of a striking simile. Early in the marriage of Emma and Charles, he is blissfully happy, sexually happy (though she probably is not), and happy in his illusions about the splendid woman he now has as his wife. This is how Flaubert summarizes the tenor of his contentment: “he went out, chewing on his happiness, like those who still masticate, after dinner, the truffles they are digesting.” And here is Emma’s experience during this same period: “As for her, her life was as cold as an attic with a skylight facing north, and boredom, silent spider, wove its web in the shadows into the corners of her heart.”

A more complicated simile is occasioned by Rodolphe contemplating his mistress’ protestations of love: “human speech is like a cracked cauldron on which we bang melodies to make bears dance when one would want to reach the stars.” In this instance, Flaubert segues from Rodolphe’s cynical disbelief in any woman’s vows of love to a general reflection, of which Rodolphe would scarcely have been capable, of the painful inadequacy of all human speech. This simile of banging on a cracked cauldron while wanting to reach the stars has been justly celebrated.



Two instances of the narrator's incisive judgment of character through simile, both from Hirshl's desperate nights outside the house where Bluma is staying, show the connection with the Flaubertian procedure. "As soon as he reached that place, he hid so that no one would see him, like a drunk who pours himself a drink and fears they will come and take it away from him." The aptness of the simile is evident: it suggests that Hirshl's attachment to Bluma is a hopeless and damaging addiction. My second example is another case of Hebraizing a technique, for the simile is drawn from traditional Jewish practice: "Like a man standing on the night of Tisha B'Av when the heavens open and he raises his eyes upward to plea for mercy, so Hirshl stood looking up at Bluma's window. What did Hirshl want? Hirshl wanted Bluma to open her window and see him." Tisha B'Av, the day of fasting in commemoration of the destruction of the two ancient temples and other calamities of Jewish history, occurs in midsummer. The folk belief is that in the middle of the night on Tisha B'Av the heavens open, and at that moment pleas for mercy may rise unimpeded to God. The point of the simile is precisely its inappropriateness. Bluma up above in her servant's bedroom has displaced "God in his heaven." That displacement can cut two ways: either Hirshl's desperate longing for even a glance from Bluma is a kind of idolatry, or the overwhelming intensity of his longing for the woman he loves can be conveyed only by comparing it to a wretched person's plea for mercy from God.



What does this comparative scrutiny of two writers from utterly different literary traditions tell us about the broader issue of literary influence? In recent decades, scholars have

justly tended to avoid the term "influence" as too crude and misleading a representation of what happens when one writer interacts with another. The term is not inappropriate, I think, when a workmanlike writer reads an original one: the stylistic effect of Hemingway's innovative prose on American hardboiled writers can properly be characterized as an influence. But something different happens when a great writer encounters on the page a great writer who came before him: it is a kind of alchemy. The earlier writer strikes a spark in the later one, gives him certain ideas about how things might be done, which he will then proceed to do in his own way. Agnon read Flaubert at a relatively early stage in his career — "before writing and after writing," as he worded it in his letter to Zalman Schocken. Then, I imagine, he would have said to himself something like this: "That is really good. I could in some way use that. But how would I handle it? How could I make it work in the style and the invented world in which I have been forging my own literary way?"

When a writer of the first order of originality discovers another writer of manifest mastery, something more deeply interesting than influence occurs. Agnon would have been Agnon in most respects if he had never read a word of Flaubert, but it seems safe to say that as he was gaining artistic maturity, Flaubert helped him, if even modestly, to become the writer whom he aspired to be.

In *A Simple Story*, Agnon was writing, a little anachronistically, a nineteenth-century realist novel, for which *Madame Bovary* could serve as a useful model. Yet he was too restless an artist to remain content with this mode of fiction. During this same period in the 1930s, as I have noted, he had begun to produce radically experimental short stories. In the 1940s and 1950s, he would explore new and anti-realist directions. In

*Only Yesterday*, in 1945, he devoted numerous chapters to the interior monologue of a dog named Balak, who proves to be the book's most philosophically reflective character, and its most engaging one.

Toward the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s, Agnon would fashion two remarkable dreamlike novellas replete with symbolism that were unlike anything he had written before. His last, uncompleted novel, *Shira*, which he was still working on at the time of his death in 1970, is a fascinating fusion of the symbolism of the novellas — leprosy is the most prominent symbol — with tormented sexuality and resonant reflections on art and truth. So Flaubert cannot be regarded as the dominant or decisive force in Agnon's career. But still the French master made a difference. He had spoken profoundly to the Hebrew writer, and played a role in his evolution as an original artist at a moment when he was just coming into his own.

