

“And Whatever Corner You Turn It’s Either Garbage and Dirt or a Beard and Sidelocks”

Agnon on Jews, Dirt, and Garbage

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Abstract This article examines the aesthetics of dirt in Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s writing, through the perspective of the Anthropocene. I argue that the climate crisis requires a rethinking of many aspects of human life, including the way we think about consumerism, physical objects, bodily fluids, and filth. Agnon’s writing—situated and struggling between two opposing aesthetic orders—can function as a valuable opportunity for rethinking these issues. I start with two moments of filth: The very short story “Three Sisters,” and the story about Firadeus’s father in the novel *Shira*. In the main part of the article, I focus on two short stories: “The Orange Peel” and “From Lodging to Lodging,” both published in the late 1930s. I argue that filth and cleanliness are central concepts for understanding the aesthetic role assigned to “the Jew” and their entrance into modernity. Agnon draws a connection between dirt and “the East” as a general category that brings together the wearers of sidelocks, the lower classes, Eastern immigrants, and the Jewish town. The pioneering option, as I demonstrate, fails to contain the dirty remnant, and likewise misses the redemption that is possibly hidden within the trash. Thus, Agnon sullies the possibility of clean literature, bringing into modern Hebrew literature Galician remnants.

Keywords filth, Agnon, garbage

IN DAVID KNA'ANI'S *S. Y AGNON BE'AL PEH* [*S. Y. AGNON IN HIS OWN WORDS*], AGNON Laments the troubles afflicting him:

Lately, worse troubles have come. The street, which used to be quiet, is now noisy and loud from morning till late at night—the hotel built nearby and its guests, the cars, and the drivers tooting their horns. The municipal garbage dump emits terrible odors. He has already written to the mayor, to no avail. Now he can't concentrate on a single line while writing.¹

The disparity between the declaration that “worse troubles have come” and what follows creates a dramatic effect. Of course, noise and unpleasant odors can be very annoying; however, calling them “troubles” sounds exaggerated. Yet if we take Agnon's words seriously, and if I am allowed to read a bit much into them, we see that immediately after lamenting the noise and pollution, Agnon states that “now he can't concentrate on a single line,” revealing the dirt and noise as a veritable poetic obstacle. And yet, despite this declaration of aversion to the garbage dump and the noise, and despite the wish to escape them, in his works Agnon repeatedly returns to the subject of filth—as if it is a kind of wisdom (Torah) that must be learned. Why? What can one learn from filth?

I will start with two moments of filth: The very short story “Three Sisters,” and the story about Firadeus's father in the novel *Shira*. In order to understand the place of garbage in the stories, I will turn to a broader introduction on garbage and its relations to modern Hebrew literature and ecocritical thought. This discussion will set the theoretical background necessary for a new reading of the meaning of filth and garbage in Agnon's writing, and for understanding the literary and social context of the stories. In the main part of the article, I will focus on two short stories by Agnon: “The Orange Peel” and “From Lodging to Lodging,” both published in the late 1930s. I will argue that filth and cleanliness are central concepts for understanding the aesthetic role assigned to “the Jew” and to their entrance into modernity, and that this discussion can stimulate a different ecocritical perspective. By this I wish to join previous discussions, such as those of Ronit Chacham and Galili Shachar, on beggars in Agnon's writings.² However, while these studies primarily emphasized the wretchedness of the body, and at times preferred to address this misery metaphorically, I intend to examine more concretely the filthiness of space and the materiality of dirt, as part of a wider discussion on waste.

“THREE SISTERS” AND THE GARBAGE MAN FROM *SHIRA*

One of the emblematic moments of filth in Agnon's writings is the bloodstain that cannot be wiped off in his well-known story “Three Sisters.” It is a very short story,

almost like a Talmudic tale, which centers on three sisters who work as seamstresses, sewing white garments for others, but who see no blessing in their labor. Even when they earn some money it is only a handful, barely enough to satisfy their basic needs. The stain on the white garment is the main event that drives the plot of the story:

On one occasion they engaged in making a lovely wedding dress for a wealthy bride. Upon completing their handiwork, they recalled their sorrows for they had nothing on their flesh but frail skin, and that too was growing old.

Their hearts overflowed with grief. One sighed and said, All our lives we sit and toil for others while we lack even a piece of cloth to make burial shrouds for ourselves.

The second one told her sister not to tempt Satan. She sighed as well and shed a tear.

The third also wanted to say something but when she opened her mouth to speak blood splattered out and stained the bride's garment.³

In this story Agnon introduces aesthetic questions through the notion of whiteness and cleanliness, alongside questions regarding social class. He highlights the way in which sighs turn into actual stains that damage the whiteness of the garment, no longer allowing its beauty to conceal the physical and social distress that lies behind its creation. The bloodstain challenges the category of cleanliness and functions as an example of the importance of sully literature by bringing the unclean and untidy into the sphere of the neat and the aesthetic. The blood bursting onto the garment reveals that cleanliness is often only an optical illusion, a state gained primarily by an act of obscuring. Thus, this story functions as a performance of tainted art, similar perhaps to contemporary demonstrative political actions conducted against famous works of art by environmental activists.

Even when filth does not leave its mark on the center of Agnon's work, it appears on the margins, telling a complementary story of social status. This is so in the novel *Shira*. At the center of the novel is Herbst's love for the nurse Shira; however, it also contains other characters on the narrative's margins. One of the story's secondary characters is Firadeus, described as follows:

Firadeus is only sixteen, and she supports six people: herself, her mother, her mother's mother, her father's blind father, and Manawa, the madwoman they found on the road from Persia to Jerusalem, as well as her little brother, Ziyon. He was born the day her father was killed by an Arab rogue when he was on his way to dump Talpiot's garbage. Ziyon the father, who was Talpiot's garbage man, is still

remembered fondly by the local housewives; if he found something that had fallen into the garbage by mistake, he would return it.⁴

Though negligible in size compared to the entire novel, this story, which Agnon repeats four times and alludes to a fifth time,⁵ becomes a kind of independent narrative that “migrates” as a whole unit and requires its own reading (somewhat like a rabbinic tale that is repeated in different contexts as an independent unit). Class differences appear along with the description of Firadeus’s father as the garbage collector:

The surplus—what they don’t manage to deposit in their intestines—spoils and is put in garbage cans, which they hire a poor man to dispose of. You have a term for him in modern Hebrew, in your Hebrew that invents new words and puts the old ones out of mind, so that those who are proficient in the new language can’t understand a line of Scripture. The garbage man goes from house to house, clearing away the garbage. He is often disheartened by what he sees in those garbage cans, because what a Talpiot housewife throws out is enough for a poor man and his family to live on contentedly.⁶

This paragraph puts together materials and language: old materials are thrown out and replaced by new ones, although they still have much life within them. In a similar manner, new Hebrew words replace and put out of mind old meanings. One of the elements of the story that is also repeated is the father’s hat, which he found in the garbage:

As he did every day, on that day he walked home after collecting the garbage from the houses of Talpiot, an empty sack on his shoulders and an Ashkenazi-style hat on his head—a hat he had found in a Talpiot garbage can. It was a fine hat, and, being unfamiliar with the Ashkenazi practice of throwing out something perfectly good, he assumed it had landed in the garbage by mistake. He picked up the hat and knocked on the door of the adjacent house.⁷

His daughter Firadeus takes after him, enjoying what the Ashkenazi housewives, richer than she is, have discarded.⁸ The social and ethnic tension emerges only momentarily and disturbs the center of the story, before it is pushed back to the fringes.

Neither Firadeus nor her father have any choice; they must risk their lives to make a living, coming to neighborhoods to which access is dangerous for Jewish pedestrians. The father is murdered while the nice hat—the one he found in the

Ashkenazis' trash—is on his head. Thus, the attempt to “Ashkenazify” himself fails due to the work conditions that put him at risk. The “garbage man,” returning like a narrative ghost throughout the story, taints the novel and Herbst's own leisurely strolls, unaware of the system of servants and workers surrounding him. This is Agnon's way of reminding us that garbage and dirt are relative concepts (“what a Talpiot housewife throws out is enough for a poor man and his family to live on contentedly”) while soiling the novel with this narrative repetition. Although the “dirt” remains in the novel's background, it can illuminate the class relations that underpin it.

Agnon is not the first nor the only author to draw a connection between dirt and status, and neither is he the first to engage in such “literary filthening.”⁹ However, I propose examining Agnon's attitude toward dirt as part of a search for “Jewish” writing, seeing it as a kind of stubborn remnant. The passage cited at the beginning of this essay reveals Agnon as having an aversion to filth; however, as I will show in what follows, in his works he vacillates between an aesthetics of cleanliness and an aesthetics of filth.

FILTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

By focusing on moments of literary filth I wish to bring filth to the fore, addressing it as a material and metaphor worthy of literary and aesthetic contemplation. In doing so, I am following, among others, in the footsteps of writer and environmental activist Edward Abbey. As Kevin Trumpeter demonstrates, in Abbey's books, deliberate dirtying and acts of littering the public space function as a provocative ecological protest, intended to make filth's presence more palpable, instead of maintaining its illusionary removal to geographic and social margins. As he argues, “keeping the environment beautiful” campaigns were often supported precisely by the most polluting companies, showing how this desired cleanliness functions within, and not against, polluting practices and ideologies. Abbey, an environmental activist who fought against the construction of roads in nature reserves, argued against popular cleaning campaigns, claiming that “it's not the beer cans that are ugly; it's the highway that is ugly.”¹⁰ Following the line of Abbey's somewhat controversial yet eye-opening protest, I also seek to make neglected literary filth more present.

Indeed, cleanliness and dirt, beauty and ugliness are not absolute opposite values, and they change their meaning in the context of specific historical and social settings and beliefs. What appeared shiny in the 1990s looks different today, as the medical and environmental implications of consumer culture become increasingly evident. With

time, materiality changes, and so do the feelings that materials evoke in us. As part of a broader attempt to think about filth and trash in modern Hebrew literature, I wish to return to one moment of transition that oscillates between cleanliness and filth. This is a moment when a desire to clean the Jewish sphere and the Jewish body emerges; yet some voices of hesitation regarding this project can still be heard as well. Agnon, as an ambivalent writer, standing between aesthetic orders, serves as a good example of this moment.¹¹

Ugliness and physical defects are not the same as filth and stench, and filth is not always the same as trash. And yet I will argue that filth and ugliness have interconnected meanings, which destabilize the industrial perfection of consumerism founded on an endless demand for the new. Beauty, along with happiness, argues Zygmunt Bauman in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, was one of the most exciting promises offered by modernity. This promised beauty was intertwined with a certain perception of perfection, yet perfection is necessarily a temporary state, which eventually passes into decline. Something, whether old age, sickness, usage, time, or unfortunate accidents, will mar an object's perfection and will impose on what was once beautiful the inevitable verdict: its transformation into garbage.¹² This deterioration is not external to or a deviation from modern time and efficiency but rather its unavoidable consequence. From the very first moments, both of ourselves and of objects, a future inevitable disposal on the side of the road is guaranteed. Being dumped, laid off, left in a nursing home; all are central situations in modern life.

This article's starting point is that waste and filth are important and central materials for understanding our era, in which waste is produced in ever-increasing quantities, and that thinking about them is important precisely from an aesthetic perspective. As Terry Eagleton argues, aesthetics was born as a discourse of the body and as a bridge that mediates law and reason for the individual, so that they can be perceived as natural and universal. Through aesthetics, reason passes from the domain of the intellect into the senses, and thus the law is experienced as voluntary, which lends the law its hidden "magical" power. Put differently, aesthetic taste, although experienced as something personal and natural, corresponds to and is constructed by bourgeois ideology and its industrial-economic order.¹³

In an age of waste and in an era of constant overflowing production, it is necessary to question the feelings evoked in us by materials and rethink what constitutes waste and our attitude toward it. This, then, is an attempt to draw attention to a desire for filth and its malodorous substances, in opposition to the modern project of beauty and cleanliness of the public sphere, the body, and language. As Heather Sullivan argues:

The challenge of shaping dirt and negotiating with its mobile grit functions as a metaphor for the project of modernity. Modernity's many anti-dirt campaigns include efforts made to remove or conceal bodily filth, waste and the sweaty labor of agricultural processes.¹⁴

This modern project is prominent in modern Hebrew literature, as the place of birth of the "new Jew" and an arena where different aesthetic notions wrestled with one another.¹⁵ The "Jew," throughout the history of the Diaspora (*Galut*), was perceived (symbolically but also in actual reality) as ungrounded, hostile to nature, and a symbol of dirt and filth. Modern Hebrew literature, which developed as a "corrective" rehabilitating project and a corpus that was meant allegedly to redeem the Jews from their atrophy, has grappled intensely with questions of the transition from the old world to the new, from the holy to the spoken language, from the sacred book to secular books, and from book to nature. This actual and literary remedial process involves romantic writing about nature as a sphere for rectification and redemption, thus becoming an emancipatory site and a region of hope. Thus, for example, Mishnah Avot 3:7, which warns against pausing from studying the Torah in order to contemplate the beauty of nature ("If one is studying while walking on the road and interrupts his study and says, 'how fine is this tree!', 'how fine is this newly ploughed field!' scripture accounts it to him as if he was mortally guilty"), received much attention in Revival literature in general and in Berdichevsky's work in particular. As shown by Dan Almagor, Berdichevsky uses this saying of the Rabbis as part of his attempt to be released from Judaism as a religion that suppresses both nature and freedom. As Berdichevsky writes explicitly in one of his essays: "Give us back the nice trees and fine ploughed field! Give us back the world!"¹⁶

Another example can be found in Bialik's famous poem "Before the Book Closet." There, the speaker's youth is spent inside the Beit Midrash, with books replacing all of life's embodiments—a woman's love, a garden on a hot June day, and "all graces of God."¹⁷ This positioning of traditional books and nature as two opposing forces is part of a prominent tendency in Hebrew Revival literature, where nature is associated with the process of secularization and efforts to erase the weak Jewish body and transfer it to a natural, healthy sphere.

Much later descriptions exhibit similar tendencies. Ariel Hirschfeld, for example, describes the ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood of Me'ah She'arim and writes from a comparable perspective:

As you approach Me'ah She'arim, the trees gradually vanish [...] even the weeds growing out of wall cracks, so characteristic of Jerusalem [...] avoid this area [...]

It is a grey, brown, white, and black world, matching the colors of the striped-grey-and-black garments of its residents.”¹⁸

Not only Hebrew authors and critics have accused the Jew of being hostile to nature. In a famous essay from 1967, Lynn White put the blame for the harm done to the natural environment on the Judeo-Christian tradition and its anthropocentric approach, leading to a wave of scholarly and theological writing that employed alternative theological sources in an attempt to prove how beneficial the “Jew” is to nature.¹⁹

However, this is not the aim of the present article; I have no apologetical intention of cleaning the Jews of their filth. On the contrary: in accordance with the growing acknowledgement of the importance of filth and waste for understanding the modern world, I will attempt to reclaim the “dirty Jew” and to demonstrate how they might function as a figure of ecocritical interest.

The conception that underlies my search of literary representations of waste and “filthy nature” is that the attempt to create a clean world—as it is manifested in the realm of literature—always involves the removal of filth from sight and its suppression to the margins, as the story “Three Sisters,” cited above, demonstrates well. Modern culture creates an appealing *mirage* of cleanliness; but this cleanliness is far from providing a true solution to the problem of waste and filth, which the industrial way of life does not attempt to reduce but merely to move out of sight more efficiently.²⁰

Concepts of dirt, disgust, and cleanliness are always also related to matters of race and class. In this context, the effort to reshape the Jew was at the heart of the secularization and rehabilitation processes of the Diasporic Jew. Mendele Mocher Sforim’s writing serves as a representative transition point that acknowledges and also rejects the new hygienic model: As Yahil Zaban argues, Mendele “intensifies the ‘Maskilic’ [enlightened] image of the ‘dirty Jew’ until it ceases to provoke revulsion and disgust and is revealed as an image, as style, as an act of creation and play.”²¹ Furthermore, according to Zaban, what is truly disturbing in Mendele’s Jews “is not the filth itself as it is their the enjoyment of it.”²² The problem, thus, is not only that the Jews are dirty (which can be a result of sociopolitical circumstances), but rather that they find in that situation pleasure and amusement.

Descriptions of the Diasporic Jew as filthy have been addressed in several studies, for example, in Aziza Khazzoom’s treatment of the descriptions of East European Jewish towns.²³ A good literary example is Anzia Yezierska, a Jewish writer who emigrated from Poland to New York in 1880 at the age of eight, who also described the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe as dirty. According to Ronit Berger, Yezierska’s stories reveal how for women immigrants, the home’s cleanliness became the

sphere through which they fought to escape the image of the “dirty Jew.” Although, she argues, filth was an actual condition that harmed the immigrants’ health and caused mortality, physicians of the period did not blame the filthy conditions, but rather the filthy nature of the Jews in general, and of Eastern European Jews in particular. Thus, the attempt to escape the ghetto was expressed, significantly, in efforts to clean the body and the surrounding space.²⁴

Yeziarska’s story “Soap and Water” opens with a description of how a teacher’s diploma was denied the poor heroine of the story, who could not find the time and means to clean herself sufficiently: at night she would work as a laundress, toiling so that others could be clean, while she herself did not have a bathtub in her apartment:

What I greatly feared, happened! Miss Whiteside, the dean of our college, withheld my diploma. When I came to her office, and asked her why she did not pass me, she said that she could not recommend me as a teacher because of my personal appearance.²⁵

Berger writes that Yeziarska “turned her rags into gold”;²⁶ indeed, for Yeziarska, dirt became a poetic material, demonstrating the circular nature of poverty in the most tangible manner: the poor cannot escape their poverty due to their filth, and cannot escape their filth due to their poverty. Although in the story, Miss Whiteside claims that “soap and water are cheap. Anyone can be clean,”²⁷ the story itself shows that cleanliness is beyond the means of one who struggles for her livelihood, stuck in jobs that leave neither enough time, nor enough money, for good personal hygiene.

Though Agnon ostensibly occupies a space different from the Jews seeking to integrate into American society, he too is concerned with the theme of filth and the way in which it participates (or not) in shaping the new Jew. In what follows, I will focus exclusively on Agnon and on the historical moment that precedes industrial waste, by examining the meanings assigned to filth within the conceptual context of Jewishness, Zionism, and literature.

“THE ORANGE PEEL”

Agnon, like the quote earlier from Hirschfeld, associates Jewish-religious attributes with filth or detachment from nature; however, as I will demonstrate, he mainly problematizes the hierarchy between filth and cleanliness, as is apparent, for instance, in this description from *Only Yesterday*:

She said the nights were beautiful in Jerusalem, but the days were tedious. The sun burns like fire and the garbage smells and the city is drenched with sadness [...] and whatever corner you turn it's either garbage and dirt or a beard and sidelocks [...]

While Jaffa is full of gardens and vineyards and citrus groves, and there's the sea and cafés, and young people.²⁸

The phrase “and whatever corner you turn it's either garbage and dirt or a beard and sidelocks” creates a relation of equality and identity between them. It is as if such a comparison is an obvious one. The contrast with Jaffa, full of gardens and groves, continues this idea of opposition and categorization: Jerusalem, its religious residents, and its filth are juxtaposed with Jaffa, gardens, nature, cafés, and youth. This connection between “traditional Judaism” and filth appears elsewhere in the book, for example as the primary cause for diseases:

There are some doctors who say disease comes from the bad water, for at that time, the water in the cisterns ran out and only foul water remained. And there are other doctors who say that the dung and the filth in the city bring the disease. And there are some doctors who say that the prayer shawl and the Shtrayml bring the disease with them.²⁹

For Agnon, it seems, garbage and filth are prime matters of interest, which even harbor major political implications. This is apparent in the story “The Orange Peel,” a short satirical piece that is part of Agnon's *Book of State*. The story concerns an orange peel that is discarded in the public sphere, causing an disproportional uproar on the street. At first, the peel seems like an adaptation of a children's “banana-peel joke,” causing people to slip and fall, spreading limbs and personal possessions all around. In the next stage, the peel attracts different types of attention: envious people are jealous of the attention it receives; others argue against the state that neglects its duty to take care of its streets. The short story ends with the initiative of the narrator, who, intending to remove the peel so it no longer offends public mores, begins to collect all the garbage on the street, but is then accused of not having a “license” to do so. This is a Kafkaesque comedy showing how the state creates an apparatus that subverts itself.

This story joins other stories collected in Agnon's *Book of State*, which, as argued by Ephraim Urbach, highlights the futility of the individual who wishes to make an act of contribution on behalf of society, but keeps getting trapped in the intricacies of society and the state's orders, which leave them confused and helpless.³⁰ However,

“The Orange Peel” did not enjoy a very good reception. As argued by Menucha Gilboa, the *Book of State* has received little attention due to its complexity, but also since it is written as a satire, a literary genre that lies between “literature” and “journalism,” thus granting it an inferior status.³¹ In 2008, the story was published as a children’s book, alongside the stories “From Enemy to Lover” and “Fable of the Goat,” in a way that also demonstrates its limited reception and impact.³² Furthermore, Agnon himself eventually regretted having published it, writing that it is a “tepid feuilleton and I’m sorry I even had it printed.”³³ It seems that it is not only the orange peel in the story that was thrown away, but, also to some extent, the story itself, by both author and readership, leaving both the peel and the story neglected in a corner.

Is the story, then, worthy of excessive attention, similar to the peel that lies at its heart, or should it be discarded for good, as a “tepid feuilleton”? As is typical of Agnon, the narrator skips from one subject to another, blurring the distinction between the essential and the trivial—or between the fruit and its peel. This might bring to mind the famous Talmudic story of R. Meir, who was unique in his ability to separate between the “fruit” and the “peel” in the teaching of Elisha Ben Avuya, his heretic teacher. Borrowing this image, we can ask what exactly is the peel that must be removed in order to get to the “fruit” in this case? Is it the story in its entirety, as suggested by Agnon himself? Is there any value in returning to a neglected story about a neglected filthy peel?

As Hannan Hever pointed out, these feelings of futility and hesitation are not external to the story but constitute an essential part of it, expressing the desire and the frustration of the narrator “who is unable to work for the benefit of the state, which raises the problem of the inability of the satirical literary act to repair the national sphere.”³⁴ I believe that this hesitation is also applicable to the tension inherent in the present discussion. Through a tiring and frustrating meditation on a peel, the story captures the way the aesthetic intersects with the political, and more specifically with the attempt to create a new Jewish independent state. Since the story is situated in the *Book of State*, the satire about the orange peel also marks the moment of truth of political efficiency: the test of an efficient state lies in its day-to-day operation, and what clearer symbol is there of the modernity and progress of a state than the efficiency of its garbage collection services?³⁵

Furthermore, it seems that the engagement with filth marks the Jew’s entrance into history as a moment of aesthetic change: how can the “dirty Jew” enter the state? Will he finally succeed in becoming a nation like all nations? Will the “dirty Jew” manage to collect the garbage off his streets?

In Theodor Herzl’s writing, as shown by Aziza Khazoom and by Arie Saposnik, one finds the portrayal of Palestine as horribly filthy, alongside his aspiration to clean

it.³⁶ Saposnik examines the descriptions of filth in Herzl's diaries and the way they express the attempt to achieve cultural change.³⁷

Another good example of a similar concern appears in the words of Rahel Pesah, a public health nurse, from 1931:

The entire world is watching us and our work with a thousand eyes. Will this people, that has for so many years lived a life of exile, be able to again become a free and healthy nation? [...] We must show the world that we can live a hygienic life of cleanliness, that we've succeeded in removing from ourselves the shame of exile, filth, and negligence.

We have enemies who photograph the dirt, who spread rumors that we're polluting the Holy Land, spreading diseases and so on. Yet we know the opposite is true: what we're spreading here is culture. . . . We must aspire for every corner of the country to be the symbol of cleanliness.³⁸

In her book on Tel Aviv culture during the Mandate era, Anat Helman shows how despite its efforts, the municipality proved unable to turn Tel Aviv into a clean city according to its admired Western model, and that the city lived in constant tension between its desired level of cleanliness and the actual level of filth. Regarding peels, Helman quotes a letter written by the Supervisor of Sanitary Services in November 1932, in which he condemns the widespread custom of discarding peels on the streets of Tel Aviv: "The people of Tel Aviv used to throw pieces of paper in the street. 'Throwing peels of fruit or cigarette stubs is a custom that each person here keeps willingly.'"³⁹

As evidenced by these quotes, the construction of modern culture and nationality is signified by the success of the project of cleanliness. Indeed, in "The Orange Peel" this atmosphere is expressed succinctly and evokes discomfort. At one moment in the story, one of the people is described as trying to see the whole scene in a positive way:

Another stood by and said, "What's so offensive about this peel? On the contrary, it's a sign of freedom, that anyone in the State can act as he pleases, being upon his own turf." Another stood by and said to the person who sought freedom in the garbage, "What can we do? It says in the Talmud that Jerusalem should not be turned into a rubbish heap."⁴⁰

This quote, which refers to a Talmudic discussion regarding the sanctity of Jerusalem,⁴¹ mostly reveals the gap between an imagined holy and pure Jerusalem and the real Jerusalem, which is full of filth, as the story shows. The story shifts back and forth between ideological national discussions and the more concrete and prosaic

discussion of dirt, thereby revealing dirt's double function, as a concrete material and as a metaphor. And though "The Orange Peel" ostensibly joins the attempt to clean up the streets, something in its mockery renders the project somewhat incoherent. This incoherency paves the way for examining the ambivalent stance in another story by Agnon, "From Lodging to Lodging."

"FROM LODGING TO LODGING"

A similar ambivalence regarding the wish for cleanliness alongside a persistent desire for filth can be traced in Agnon's "From Lodging to Lodging," written in 1939.

This story concerns its protagonist's search for a proper home. Here, the narrator encounters a paradox: to regain his health, the sick protagonist moves to an apartment in Tel Aviv, but finds himself in a noisy atmosphere where he cannot sleep. At the entrance he is always greeted by the apartment owners' dirty child, with whom he stops to play each time he goes out. The child wastes his time and thrusts its finger in his eye, but still the hero cannot give up these encounters. The apartment is described as a noisy, dirty nightmare.

The narrator's attitude toward the child's noise and filth becomes obsessive, yet absurd; he wants silence, yet understands that silence is equivalent to death. Following his many complaints, his friends find him a different apartment, quiet and clean, situated on the edge of town and surrounded by nature and fruit trees. The quiet and clean house seems like paradise and salvation—the perfect apartment in which to recover. However, when he arrives there with the furniture mover, the place's silence and beauty have the opposite effect:

Suddenly my heart sank, and I looked at the doorstep of the house. It was clean and scrubbed, and shadows of flowers were playing upon it. But that child was not there and did not climb all over me and did not hang on to me and did not stretch his arms to me. Silently the shadows of the flowers waved upon the doorstep; there was no child there at all.⁴²

The protagonist's recollection of the filthy child happens "suddenly" and is unwelcome, as it sets aside and reverses the expected effect of the new and clean apartment. That is, the emotional recollection is portrayed as a surprising occurrence, which stands in contrast to aesthetic expectations. Indeed, elsewhere in the story there is another example where cleanliness and filth are intentionally posed one against the other, in a way that reveals the tension between competing aesthetic orders. There, the narrator embarks on a tour of the land:

I passed through the land and I saw that we had several more villages. Places that had produced only thistles and thorns had become like a garden of God. And like the land, so too the people were happy in their labors and rejoicing in building their land, their sons and daughters *healthy and wholesome. Their hands were not soiled, and their eyes were not diseased.*⁴³

That is, the children of the pioneers—the “new Jews”—are described as clean and healthy, in contrast to the dirty child. Although the land of the pioneers is described as perfect, it does not constitute a true life-option for the narrator. As shown by Yigal Schwartz, the story moves between different spaces that the narrator examines, yet the space of the kibbutz and the pioneers is described as an exterritorial sphere that is irrelevant for the narrator. In addition to Schwartz’s explanation regarding the theological and the political aspects which constitute the background for this “irrelevance,” I wish to highlight the aesthetic aspect, which joins the political and the theological in rendering the pioneers’ world inaccessible.

It should be noted that the emphasis Agnon places on the condition of the baby’s diseased eyes, compared with the healthy eyes of the pioneers, is by no means arbitrary: trachoma was very widespread in Palestine in the early twentieth century, particularly among Arabs and immigrants from Eastern countries. The disease was the result of hygienic shortcomings and raised concern among local physicians, who even dedicated a conference to it in 1914.⁴⁴

Since the narrator’s departure from the urban, crowded, and dirty apartment fails to satisfy his needs, he immediately regrets the move and returns there, in a moment described as follows:

The child was lying on the doorstep, soiled with sores. His eyelashes were stuck together, covered with some sort of green pus.⁴⁵

The dirty body, with its sores and eye discharge, lying on the doorstep, is described as a welcoming body that allows the narrator to enter and feel at home.

Yet, the dirt doesn’t stop at the threshold:

The child’s mother came in. She put down her bag and curled her lips. “So, you have returned to us, sir. Had we known we would have tidied up the room a bit.” I nodded to her and went up to my room. There was so much dust there that the real garbage⁴⁶ could not be seen.⁴⁷

We may thus say that although Agnon ostensibly yearns for the new, clean space, the space of hills, nature, and health, and of the pioneer settlements, he cannot resist

or completely overcome his pervasive desire for dirt. To paraphrase Freud's famous words, we may ask, "What does Agnon want?" Cleanliness or dirt?

Turning back to "The Orange Peel" with this question in mind, it would seem that in a properly operating state, the streets are indeed clean; yet the story's desire lies in that discarded peel that does not allow the birth of the clean and tidy Jewish street. It seems that Agnon wants two things that are diametrically opposed: to clean and to make dirty at one and the same time. This ambivalence has to do with Agnon's complex stance as a Galician author and his attitude toward Western European aesthetics—an aesthetics that he simultaneously adopts and rejects.

Here it is pertinent to note the decline in Galicia's status as a literary center near the end of the Haskalah and the derogatory image assigned to Galician authors.⁴⁸ Nurit Govrin presents Dov Sadan's and R. Benjamin's theory of the "departure from Galicia," according to which writers who remained in Galicia were unable to develop into central authors. Upon first arriving in Palestine Agnon, too, was dogged by the stereotype of the "Galician," until being accepted as a worthy author. A taste of this stereotype can be felt in the figure of Yitzhak Komer in *Only Yesterday*. According to the theory of the departure from Galicia, Agnon arrived early enough to escape the sad fate of a forgotten author.⁴⁹ Hannan Hever, by contrast, does not see this as an issue of shifts between literary centers, but rather considers Galician literature as different in a more profound way. In his essay "Fear the Galicians," he argues that Galician authors proposed a local, rather than universal aesthetics—one which partially validates diasporic life and was therefore unsuitable to the formation of the national subject.⁵⁰

Can filth be understood in the framework of this discussion? It seems that Galicia, Agnon's birthplace, has indeed acquired a particularly filthy image. As noted by Nurit Govrin, Gershon Shofman, who deserted the Russian army and sought refuge in Galicia, where he lived in Lvov for nine years (1904–13), describes its wretchedness, and the filth of Galicia emerges in several of his stories: "This dirt of poverty, in which the daughters of Galicia live and grow, seems, like manure, to spur their growth quite handsomely"; "Muddy and loathsome are the streets of the city of L. in Galicia."⁵¹ Returning to the quote from *Only Yesterday* cited in the title of this essay, and to the garbage man from Talpiot in the novel *Shira*, it seems Agnon draws a connection between dirt and "the East" as a general category that brings together the wearers of sidelocks, the lower classes, Eastern immigrants, and the Jewish town. The pioneering option, as demonstrated in "From Lodging to Lodging," fails to contain the dirty remnant, and likewise misses the redemption that is possibly lying in the trash. Thus, Agnon sullies the possibility of "clean literature," like the three sisters who stain the white dress. In other words, though perhaps Agnon left Galicia in time to become part of the literary center, he carried along with him remnants of Galicia.

I'd like to conclude by proposing "Agnonian filth" and the "dirty Jew" as an important aesthetic choice in an era of ever-growing consumerism. Agnon is not concerned with trash as an environmental issue, yet reading his works promotes renewed thought about aesthetic conventions, which can be examined in relation to historical, spatial, class, and religious images.

Literature on the climate crisis often focuses on literary works that concentrate on climatic disasters, wild nature, animals, or anthropocentric viewpoints. This essay suggests a different approach. I argued that the climate crisis and growing ecocritical sensitivity require a rethinking of many aspects of human life, including the way we think about consumerism, physical objects, bodily fluids (like sweat), and filth. In the era of the Anthropocene, aesthetic tastes will also change, and what was once repulsive might, if not must, be revealed as a fruitful ecological possibility. Agnon's writing—situated and struggling between two opposing aesthetic orders—can function as a valuable opportunity for rethinking these issues.

At the beginning of the essay, I discussed the place that nature and religion played in the literature of the authors of the Hebrew Revival period. It may seem fitting that ecocritical thought on nature and the environment should return to the utopian nature that was the object of desire of the authors of the Revival period. However, considering critical thought about garbage and waste in contemporary culture, I sought to reclaim the literary figure of the "dirty Jew"—that is, the Jew who is uncomfortable and does not feel at home in nature, and who stands in opposition to modern projects and perceptions of cleanliness and aesthetics.

NOTES

1. Kna'ani, *S. Y. Agnon*, 75–76.
2. Shahar, *Gufim veshemot*, 90–149; Chacham, "Al betlirs," 149–80.
3. Agnon, "Three Sisters," 123.
4. Agnon, *Shira*, 201.
5. Agnon, *Shira*. The story is told on pages 202, 264, 367, and 511, and is alluded to in the tale of Firadeus who behaves like her father on page 466 (according to the Hebrew edition).
6. Agnon, *Shira*, 264.
7. Agnon, *Shira*, 373.
8. Agnon, *Shira*, 477.
9. See Bar Yosef-Paz, "White Trash."
10. Trumpeter, "The Can is Beautiful," 20.
11. Hacohen-Bick, "Meshichim u'mesichim," 113–33.
12. Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 118.

13. Eagleton, "Ideology," 329–30.
14. Sullivan, "Dirt Theory," 526.
15. On the "new Jew" see, among others, Gluzman, *Haguf haziony*.
16. Berdichevsky, "Hirhurim," 57, and see Dan Almagor's discussion in "Ma na'eh ilan zeh."
17. Bialik, "Before the Book Closet."
18. Hirschfeld, *Reshimot*.
19. White, "Historical Roots," 1203–7; on the essay's major impact and reactions to it, see Yoreh, *Waste Not*, 2–3.
20. As Gay Hawkins argues, "Waste is a social text that reveals the logic or illogic of a culture" and that functions as the dark side of consumer culture (Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 2). The contemplation of waste, she claims, affects almost every aspect of our conduct and influences our attitude toward the body, space, and objects.
21. Zaban, *Venafsho ma'achal ta'avah*, 47 (Hebrew; my translation).
22. Zaban, *Venafsho ma'achal ta'avah*, 44.
23. Khazzoom, "The Great Chain," 481–510.
24. Berger, "Living in Dirt," 19–35.
25. Yezierska, "Soap and Water," 163.
26. Berger, "Living in Dirt," 32.
27. Yezierska, "Soap and Water," 164.
28. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 159.
29. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 589.
30. Urbach, "Peraqim shel sefer hamedina."
31. Gilboa, "Sefer hamedina," 253–60.
32. Agnon, *Klipat tapu'ach hazahav*.
33. Kna'ani, *S. Y Agnon*, 82.
34. Hever, "Mitiv'iy eineni medini," 197.
35. For a contemporary discussion regarding the connection between garbage and sovereignty/occupation in Palestine see Stamatopoulou-Robbins, *Waste Siege*.
36. Khazzoom, "The Great Chain," 481–510.
37. Saposnik, "Kedusha tzionit," 165–94.
38. "Zophe habri'ut: gilayon hakinus ha'arzi hasheni shel agudot habri'ut vezofeha," (1931), 3, quoted in Hirsch, *Banu hena lehavi et hama'arav*, 185.
39. Helman, *Or vayam hekefuha*, 45.
40. Agnon, "The Orange Peel," 149–150.
41. See, for example, Bavli Bava Kamah 82b.
42. Agnon, "From Lodging to Lodging," 168.
43. Agnon, "From Lodging to Lodging," 166. My emphasis.
44. Navot and Gross, "Hamilhama bagar'enet," 89–114.
45. Agnon, "From Lodging to Lodging," 168–69.

46. The English translation here is “dirt,” but in Hebrew the word Agnon uses is *ashpah*, which is more precisely translated as “garbage” or “trash.”
47. Agnon, “From Lodging to Lodging,” 169.
48. Shabbat, “Frenemies,” 92.
49. Govrin, “MeGalitsia legalei yetzirah,” 439.
50. Hever, “The Struggle,” 252.
51. Shofman, Kitvey G. *Shofman*, I, 142; 97.

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