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Making Love in Language

Agnon's "Leilot" and the Function of Eros in Literary Fiction

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This article examines the relationship between literary fiction and eros in Agnon's short story "Leilot" ("Nights") from the 1922 collection ʿAl kappot hamanʿul. *Drawing on Alan Mintz's interpretations and Denis de Rougemont's theoretical approach to eros, the article highlights the narrative techniques Agnon employed to evoke and sustain eros in his work. A preliminary comparison to Edgar Allan Poe's "Eleonora" (1842) is also undertaken. The article argues that realism in language and plot obstructs the development of eros within the narrative, whereas elements like surrealism and the deferral of the reader's gratification are techniques Agnon recognized as essential to expressing eros in literature.*

Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon's "Leilot" ("Nights") is one of the most puzzling works in the love story collection *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*. It was in response to reading this surrealist first-person account of Agnon's famous protagonist Ḥemdat that the Hebrew writer Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner, in a 1912 letter, critically commented that "the madness exceeds the art."[1] Lacking the readability of Agnon's better-known stories, "Leilot," which initially appeared in a 1912 anthology, was not included in Agnon's collected works until 1941, and was added to *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* later.[2] Having received very little scholarly attention, this story remains on the margins of Agnon's beloved oeuvre. Examining Agnon's literary choices in this strange love story, the present article describes how "Leilot" functions as an experiment in testing the relationship between literary fiction and eros.

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My analysis engages with the work of the late Alan Mintz, whose essay "Agnon in Jaffa: The Myth of the Artist as a Young Man" is the most comprehensive analysis of this story.[3] To construct a theoretical framing and definition of the notion of eros, I draw on insights from Denis de Rougemont's seminal study on eros and literature, *Love in the Western World* (1939).[4] I also show that we can draw on a comparison with Edgar Allan Poe's "Eleonora" (1842) in order to understand the literary underpinnings of eros in the work of Agnon.[5]

Bringing the insights of Mintz and de Rougemont to bear on Agnon's "Leilot," I argue that Agnon employs the story and its characters to stretch the function of eros as far as it can be taken with the help of language and to test its limits. Agnon's experimental narrative reveals that when erotic longings are actualized on the level of the plot and are portrayed in a realist fashion, they lose their allure and emotional intensity. I argue that Agnon's treatment of eros in "Leilot" confirms de Rougemont's claim that an erotic narrative can never reach its peak without annihilating itself in the process. In "Leilot," sustaining erotic tension requires a mysterious and obfuscating style, exemplified by Agnon's depiction of Ḥemdat's love-intoxicated first-person perspective. In contrast, realist elements in both language and plot undermine the development of eros in the narrative.

INTRODUCING AGNON'S LOVERS

Agnon's protagonist, Ḥemdat, holds the key to understanding the entire story. He is an important character who appears in several of Agnon's works; he is the central character in "Giv'at haḥol" and plays a supporting role in *Temol shilshom*. He appears to be especially cherished by Agnon, who even named his own son Ḥemdat.[6] At times, Ḥemdat appears like a cliché of fictional lovers, from Romeo to Goethe's Werther. He is described as a well-bred (*ben-tuvim*) and sensitive twenty-year-old European emigre, whose long black curls have grayed prematurely, in the text's jest, as a result of Ḥemdat's self-inflicted tortures of affect.[7] In "Leilot," Ḥemdat has a penchant for sentimentality and the macabre. He keeps a skull of a maiden in his room, which he uses as a candle holder, and he fantasizes about having his eyes blinded to keep them from seeing anyone but his principal love interest. He is a curator of objects given to him by past and present lovers, such as old flowers, dishes,

and clothes. Like Werther, he is more than willing to suffer for love and even give up his life for it.[8]

Ḥemdat's Jewishness, however, casts him in a distinctive light as a lover. His eros is linked to his aptitude and love for textuality. In this sense, he resembles the few other Jewish literary lovers who preceded him, such as Yitskhok Leybush Peretz's Monish, whose effeminate beauty and "knowledge of the Shas" make "maidens blush."[9] Ḥemdat is above all a lover of letters—a poet, a writer, a tutor, an unofficial struggling artist. Pieces of folktales and stories dangle from his mouth; he invents fairy tales about kings and mermaids and uses his literary skills to charm and to rouse women's fancies. As a result, he has no shortage of female admirers, but through the stories he tells them he confuses and obfuscates real relationships, providing himself with the means to escape them.

Ḥemdat as the first-person narrator is the producer and receptacle of eros in this story. In "Giv'at haḥol," he is described as a womanizer.[10] From several stories we gather that he appears to be irresistibly attractive to women and treats this fact nonchalantly: "I have kissed many girls in my day," he recounts in "Leilot," where he continues to be haunted by a handful of living and dead female liaisons whose kisses he strangely describes. Among them are the colorful characters of Dansa, the "dead one"; Wilma, whose lips are like a snail; Thea; Yael Ḥayot (whose name means "Ibex, Wild Animals"); and the female protagonist of "Leilot," the young Ruḥamah.[11] In "Leilot," however, we find Ḥemdat subdued and repentant, for he has rejected pleasures of the flesh in favor of an unattainable and incorruptible ideal of the mysterious Salsibylla. In modernist, stream-of-consciousness passages, Agnon takes the reader into the obsessive and lovesick mind of Ḥemdat, who is perpetually searching for and creating his fictional encounters with his elusive lover.

Tellingly, the name Ḥemdat is in the construct form (*semikhut*), and so means "the perpetual desire of." As implied by both the root of the name as well as its grammatical form, this character is an incomplete proposition perpetually longing for an unattainable object. Properly understood, Ḥemdat is the embodiment of eros. At the same time, when we examine the strange name Salsibylla, we find that its symbolic significance points to the unattainable object of Ḥemdat's longings. This name has Arabic origins, as Salsabil appears in the Qur'an as a fountain in paradise

and corresponds to a drink of fine wine and ginger (*zanjabil*). With the story set in Jaffa, a city in which Jewish settlers from Eastern Europe encountered the ultimate other of the Orient, the Arabic name of Ḥemdat's beloved serves to highlight her foreignness and inaccessibility, as well as her attraction. To Ḥemdat, Salsibylla is a muse, a goddess, a fantasy, and the object of his obsessive thoughts, which are the sole driving force of the narrative. The plot in "Leilot" is punctuated by the fact that Salsibylla mysteriously appears, vanishes, and then appears again at the end of the story. The narrative is also occupied with Ḥemdat's ritualistic worship of Salsibylla, which consists in collecting flowers for her, carving her name into a tree, collecting seashells for her, invoking her name, and most importantly facing imagined obstacles that stand in the way of their union. The obstacles to his union with Salsibylla are created by her absence and unpredictability as well as by the interference of a more tangible woman in his life.

This other female character in the story is the scorned lover. This character is assigned to the sixteen-year-old Ruḥamah, whose function is to obstruct the realization of Ḥemdat's longing in the plot. The name Ruḥamah first appears in Hosea when God tells him to name the daughter born to him by the adulterous wife he was told to take as a symbol for Israel's unfaithfulness, *lo- ruḥamah*, meaning "not loved, not pitied." Hence it is a symbolically potent choice for a scorned lover. Unlike the elusiveness of the name "Salsibylla," the name "Ruḥamah" represents a close connection to Jewish nationhood. With Hosea as an intertext, in a poem by the maskilic Hebrew writer Yehudah Leib Gordon titled "My Sister Ruḥamah," this name evokes the suffering of the Jewish nation in exile amid pogroms and antisemitic sanctions in the nineteenth-century Russian Empire.

In "Leilot," Ruḥamah's narrative competes for the reader's attention with the narrative of Salsibylla. At first Ruḥamah follows Ḥemdat as he tells her tales of romantic love that enchant and seduce her. To show her desire for Ḥemdat, she literalizes the actions of the characters from these tales to an extreme point of self-sacrifice, leading her to radical acts such as shaving her head and burning her violin. However, Ruḥamah's gallant attempts to win the heart of Ḥemdat by literalizing the love stories he shares with her through their enactment achieve the opposite effect and repulse Ḥemdat, driving him farther away into the world of fantasy and fiction.

THE FUNCTION OF EROS IN LANGUAGE

In "Agnon in Jaffa: The Myth of the Artist as a Young Man," Mintz argues that Agnon used "Leilot" to negotiate structuralist questions about the nature of experience and the nature of language."[12] He explains that "the accession to textuality was Agnon's most difficult achievement—to allow the text to float free, powered by its own internal production—to recreate the polysemousness that the rabbis accorded to the biblical texts—must have required [on the part of Agnon] an ordeal of faith."[13] In other words, Mintz insists that this story cannot be interpreted allegorically but must be considered on its own textual terms. While the text tries to seduce us into allegorizing it—for example, reading the character of Salsibylla or Ruḥamah's pigeon to signify the Shekhinah, as Ruth Netzer, Hillel Barzel, and other scholars have done—doing so would be a mistake.[14] Instead, according to Mintz, we should read this story as an exercise in creating linguistic meaning through the "symbolic self-sufficiency" of the Hebrew text rather than its dependence on allegorical meanings endowed by the tradition.[15]

Mintz's argument is compelling because in many of Agnon's works, most notably in *Temol shilshom*, such allegorical readings compete for the reader's attention with a modernist sense of meaninglessness, or the sense that the only meaning which can be derived from the absurd storylines depicted by Agnon resides in the mind of the reader. But, unlike in other works in which the rich traditional allegorical substructure competes with the modernist text for meaning, Agnon wanted to let the text of "Leilot" stand on its own. If we are not supposed to read this story allegorically, however, the question remains: What exactly are we supposed to learn about the use of language from Agnon's story? I venture to say that it teaches us what kind of literary storytelling conveys the sensation of longing to the reader most effectively. In other words, it is about how to make love in language.

INTERTEXTUALITY AND EROS

Robert Alter has characterized Agnon's writing as "longing for the sacred."[16] Indeed, there is an aspect of eros in the writer's search for artistic inspiration through engagement with sacred Jewish texts, both within and beyond the pages of

his works. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Song of Songs is a constant intertext in Agnon's work. With Mintz's opposition to reading "Nights" allegorically in mind, let us now examine the story's connection to the Song of Songs on the level of language. Famously, the Mishnah debated the inclusion of the Song of Songs in the sacred canon, ultimately asserting its sanctity over its apparently sensual language. In Rabbi Akiva's words, "the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies" (m. Yadayim 3:5). According to his view, the Song of Songs is sacred not only due to its allegorical reading as the longing between God and Israel, but also due to its literal meaning, which gets at the human experiences of love and eros. At a deeper level of understanding, hinted at by the words of Rabbi Akiva, were it not for the existence of a sacred heavenly love, human love would have been expressed only as a cry of biological craving. Thus, what raises the physical yearning to the level of "the holy of holies" are the higher spiritual cravings for which human physical love serves as allegory.[17]

Observing the connection between eros and the quest for the sublime, Alter suggests that Agnon's work "focuses on the relationship between art and sensuality and the claim of art as a unique source of truth."[18] Taking this further, I would like to suggest that, for Agnon, the human experience of eros (and its expression in language) opens the door to communion with the sacred and represents the quest for higher levels of artistic expression.

A different approach to Agnon's engagement with Song of Songs is that of Ilana Pardes. In her view, the overarching mode of eros in Agon's work is lovesickness. In her seminal study, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers,* Pardes points out that Agnon's love stories draw on intertexts from Song of Songs by foregrounding malaise. She describes lovesickness as drawing directly on the self-diagnosis of the female protagonist in the Song of Songs as *ḥolat ahavah*, "lovesick" (5:8).[19] Pardes notes that the love stories in Agnon, like sections from the Song of Songs, take place on the nights of a full moon, with lovers looking for love but unable to find it, and the coveted consummation of their love is endlessly deferred.[20]

> Whether on the moonlit shore of Jaffa's sea or on the moonlit roofs of Jerusalem, Agnon's somnambulist lovers forever wander about in quest

> of each other. Their erotic longings are never fully realized, and their loves are not only metaphorically analogous to the experience of illness and death, they come tantalizingly close to both. As much as these lovers cannot quite decipher the literal dimension of the Song that is inscribed on their backs, so too they have no control over its allegorical implication.[21]

Indeed, we first meet Ḥemdat on a night that is "clad in moonlight," dreaming of a reunion with Salsibylla, *kallati tamati*, "my bride my beloved" (Song of Songs 4:9).[22] The intertextual allusion to the Song of Songs is immediately apparent and continues in a stream of images. On the very first page of the story, Agnon's use of language resonates with the Songs of Songs in phrases like "my eyes are like roses" (*ʿeinay keshoshanim*), and the flower of the *ḥavatselet* resonates with *ḥavatselet hasharon*.[23] The sequence of allusions to the Song of Songs continues with the phrase *mah yafu raglayikh Salsibilla* ("how beautiful are your feet in sandals, Salsibylla"), an allusion to *mah yafu paʿamayikh baneʿalim* (Song of Songs 7:2).

In addition to these intertextual allusions, the Song of Songs seeps into Agnon's language in seemingly nonspecific ways. Words and phrases from the Song of Songs are integrated into his use of language itself. At times, Agnon's use of intertextual allusion to biblical sources appears as a kind of game of hide-and-seek, a mystical and erotic revealment and concealment (as described by Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik's essay "Revealment and Concealment in Language"), whose intent is not always clear. Haim Weiss, however, sees this type of use of allusion by Agnon as more childlike, resembling the children's game of searching for *ḥamets* on the night before the eve of Passover. In Weiss's view, Agnon scatters his allusions across his work like the scraps of *ḥamets* for his readers to discover.[24] An example of how Agnon plays this game of hide-and-seek with allusion can be seen in the phrase *ʿeinay keshoshanim*, "my eyes are like roses," which Ḥemdat applies to himself. The phrase is an incomplete allusion to *ʿeinayikh yonim*, "your eyes are like doves" from Song of Songs 1:4. The absence of a dove from the allusion is immediately remedied by Agnon in the following sentence with the appearance of an actual dove, *yonat shekhenati haqetanah*, "the dove of my little neighbor" in a way that seems semantically unconnected.[25]

A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO EROS IN FICTION

Originating in the classical tradition, developed in Western literature, and deliberated by thinkers from Plato to Sigmund Freud, eros is generally associated with sensual or passionate love and desire. However, de Rougemont shows in *Love in the Western World* that the nature of eros and its function in literature, music, and art have been misunderstood. Eros is not merely sensual passion and desire. Rather, eros is the love of love. He traces the rise of eros as the obsession with love to medieval literature, where the pursuit of eros results not in satisfaction but in death, or in the end of the literary work. His theory of eros in Western literature has three principal points that will theoretically ground my reading of Agnon's "Leilot."

First, eros represents a spiritual rather than a carnal type of love. To feel the ecstasy of erotic passion, which is synonymous with romantic love, entails a longing to escape from bodily limitations into the realm of the infinite. Classic lovers from Romeo and Juliet to Tristan and Isolde, de Rougemont points out, have less interest in sexual gratification and more in seeing their love as a spiritual union of souls. Counterintuitively, then, eros can be antithetical to physicality. The body can desecrate and interfere with the spirituality of eros.

Second, eros involves a fundamentally selfish and even narcissistic approach to love. Contrary to the notion of agape, a Christian love, which involves a profound love for the other rooted in partnership, compassion, and mutual support, erotic love is obsessed with the self as it is reflected by the love object. Literary characters experiencing the throes of passion are interested in seeing themselves in love, be it ecstatic or sorrowful. The adoration of the other is only instrumental in that it fuels the pleasure of experiencing the self in the ecstasy and agony of love.

Finally, de Rougemont argues that the fulfillment of love's desire is fundamentally unattainable. The closer one gets to the materialization of eros, the more elusive it becomes; its consummation causes it to disappear entirely or to morph into something other than eros. Eros can be treated as a myth in the technical sense. It is, in the words of Laurence Coupe, a mystery whose "realization is always eluding" the reader.[26] Hence, on the other side of desire attained there is only death, as the classical Romantic works of Western literature demonstrate. A poignant example of this principle is found in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. After the very first rendezvous

of the illicit lovers Anna and Vronsky, the upward momentum of their relationship comes to an end. As Anna collapses onto the floor, she whispers the words "murderer, murderer," as if she had died in that very instant.[27] With the fatal attainment of the object of desire the unraveling of both characters begins. It is thus no wonder that the endings of the modern novel involve either the death of the protagonists or, as in Jane Austen, their marriage, which is also a type of terminal point because no eros is developed beyond it.

Because a fulfillment of the object of desire does not produce the desired results of satisfaction, eros functions by delaying if not satisfaction itself, then the promise of satisfaction. Passion in the narrative is cultivated through suffering and obstacles. The passion of eros denotes loving love more than the object of love; it means to love passion for its own. What literary romantic lovers most need in order to be aflame with passion, de Rougemont observes, is "not one another's presence but one another's absence."[28] Thus, eros requires perennial obstacles to fuel it. And when eros finally succeeds in vanquishing all obstacles, it ceases to be romantic love. This is because at the moment of the consummation of eros, the illusion of attaining transcendence is shattered. Flesh meets flesh. The reality of the human condition sets in, and suddenly nothing seems as sublime as it previously appeared. Because of this, the most satisfactory ending for the tale of romantic love is not, as one would think, physical union—even though that is what all the waiting is directed toward—but death, which in literary terms means the end of the novel or story, the end of the text.

WHEN REALISM CLASHES WITH THE IDEAL: CLOSE READINGS

The central drama in "Leilot" revolves around a clash between two types of relationships: the real versus the imagined or fictional.[29] Using de Rougemont's insights on eros, I map two different types of relationships onto different models of literary love and romance. The first is the spiritual, erotic type of love, epitomized by Ḥemdat and his obsession with Salsibylla, which is seminal for the development of eros in the narrative. The second type of relationship, between Ruḥamah and Ḥemdat, is marked by realist storytelling, which offers an antithesis to eros in the narrative.

As noted before, Ḥemdat chose for his love interest someone who is not a real person. Salsibylla is a transcendent ideal and not someone to whom one can physically relate.[30] As such, she perfectly confirms de Rougemont's observation that eros is a spiritual type of longing. What is truly indicative of this is that Ḥemdat cannot look at her directly or in detail. Although he boasts of her beauty, Ḥemdat cannot even describe Salsibylla's appearance. Let us examine their first encounter:

> I was still talking to myself when Salsibylla came. My heart leaped in my throat and the words hid in my mouth so that I could not speak. How in my excitement could I speak to her? She looked at me and I at her. Yet, though I am a brave man, I dared not look at her face but at her feet. How beautiful are your feet Salsibylla, your shoes are their vases. I fell at her feet and my forehead touched the cool hem of her dress. For a long while I lay at Salsibylla's feet while she looked down at me. When I rose, she was gone. But the sky was full of stars and there was sweetness in my heart.[31]

As if in the wake of a prophetic vision, the artist/prophet in the figure of Ḥemdat is unable to look into the face of the object of his desire, and is left speechless. Ḥemdat can only see Salsibylla's feet and pay attention to them. Feet figure as an erotic symbol in the Song of Songs ("How beautiful are thy feet . . .") and in the book of Ruth, where Ruth lies down at Boaz's feet.[32] At the same time, the mention of feet in connection to a prophetic vision evokes the biblical episode where prophets (Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel) had a vision in which they beheld the sapphire pavement under "God's feet" in Exodus 24:10. Whereas the approach to the divine (conceived as the ultimate model of eros) carries with it the danger of the individual being entirely consumed by it, in the case of more worldly love, the danger is actually disappointment. The reason Ḥemdat cannot look upon Salsibylla directly is that a person cannot stare into the face of his erotic fantasy for too long and hope for it to be sustained. The danger is, of course, that if he stares too long, reality will bring him to a rude awakening. There is a danger of defilement associated with the direct gaze, but not a defilement that is inherent in the object itself, as in Lamentations 1:9: "her uncleanness was in the hem of her skirt." Rather,

the defilement pertains to the person at the center of the fantasy, the ideal. For if he looks at her directly, he might notice, for instance, that Salsibylla has a blemish or a grimace on her face, and what will happen to the fantasy of her then? The ideal will be ruined, defiled. Hence, the obfuscation of the physical in this passage plays a necessary and deliberate role: it protects and enables the continual production of eros.

The second element of the production of eros is the worship and courting of love. This is noticeable in the fetishistic aspect of Ḥemdat's love for Salsibylla, manifested in the ritual practices of the protagonist that Agnon describes: Ḥemdat waits for her to appear, gathers flowers for her, lights his lamp for her, calls out her name, carves her name into wood, and looks for her on the street, on the beach, in nature. Strangely, when Ḥemdat carves Salsibylla's name into wood, the carved letters of her name are set aglow due to glowworms that settled in the cracks of the letters; "I rejoiced to see her name lit," he exclaims.[33] Although the name presumably was lit up in a natural fashion, the effect of her name being aglow carries a supernatural overtone, reminiscent of the *urim vetummim*. This ritual of carving her name and setting it aglow almost magically resulted in Salsibylla's return and their resulting communion.

The adherence to strict ritual as a form of erotic worship is one which constantly requires sacrifice. Passion, by its very etymological definition, has to do with suffering and deprivation. Done in the name of love, however, suffering becomes indistinguishable from pleasure. We see Ḥemdat sliding into masochistic fantasies when, after their first meeting with Salsibylla, he fantasizes about being blinded by her ("put your finders in my eyes, I said, until their holes are as deep as the holes of that skull") because once they beheld Salsibylla, they should not look at anyone else.[34]

More often in the narrative, however, what Ḥemdat sacrifices for Salsibylla is reality itself and relationships with real women. For instance, he refuses to give Ruḥamah the flowers because "how could I give her a flower that was meant for Salsybilla."[35] Ḥemdat, who is accustomed to women's advances, initially gives in to Ruḥamah and kisses her. But the result is a huge disappointment: "The dew of her kisses dripped from warm lips, and my soul shuddered with cold."[36] Is the disappointment Ḥemdat feels a result of his betrayal of Salsibylla, or is it, as I would like to argue, because the pleasure from a real encounter is endlessly inferior to the fantasy?

Mintz makes a biographical observation about Agnon with regard to the struggle between reality and the erotic ideal. He argues that Agnon's literary exploration of eros on the page is, in fact, an act of sublimating and eliminating the dangers of physical intimacy.

> It is through the transformative power of language that the flesh can be made spirit, turned into a symbol, a *mashal*. Once we know that we are not talking about "real" kisses, then all is permitted; let the kisses flow, there is no danger. [. . .] Sensuality, which looked as a mean diversion in "Aḥot," and as a predatory threat in "Givaʿat haḥol," is rehabilitated in "Leilot" and raised to a kind of spirituality. In negotiating a disposition of the autobiographical fiction of his youth, Agnon taught the following lesson: once sensuality is converted from experience into language it loses its threat and can be reenchanted. [. . .] In "Leilot" Agnon could allow himself to retain these compromised images of himself as a young man—presumably identified with Ḥemdat—because in "Leilot" he documented how he had escaped them and been reborn.[37]

Putting Mintz's analysis of Agnon's personal life aside, what Mintz is saying is that language allows eros to be sustained without the dangers and, maybe more importantly, without the disappointments of real life. On the one hand, language allows the author and reader to venture into the farthest reaches of desire. On the other hand, writing emerges as a kind of cowardice, an escape into an illusionary world in which a kiss is not a real kiss, and perhaps the result of the exploration of eros in the virtual world of fiction can provide only answers and experiences that bear no relevance to what love means in the real world.

By way of contrast, let us take a look at the antithesis of eros presented by the literalist approach of Ruḥamah. She does not seem to understand Ḥemdat's erotic sophistication, and, as a result, each interaction with her drives him farther away from her. Contrary to the spiritual erotic ideal, Ruḥamah is undoubtedly carnal. She yearns for and tries to solicit Ḥemdat's touch. After she succeeds in tricking Ḥemdat to stroke her hair, he relates to her the following tale:

> I shall play a new song, the song of the golden fish brought by a mermaid to the royal streams of the king. When the king saw her he stroked her hair. Do you know what the mermaid did? She shaved it all off lest someone come and stroke the same hair that had been stroked by the king. And she laid it at the king's feet.[38]

In telling this tale filled with classical and folkloric elements of romance, Ḥemdat is vainly sharing with Ruḥamah his longing for Salsibylla but through the narrative of the female mermaid. How does this story affect Ruḥamah? What does she understand? Her immediate action is to literalize the story. She shaves off her hair and stores it for safekeeping because Ḥemdat touched it. But she does not get the reaction she expected. Ḥemdat mocks her by comparing her head to that of a young boy, rejecting her once again.

Why is it that Ruḥamah's attempt to sacrifice her hair like the mermaid in the story backfires rather than achieving the desired effect of making Ḥemdat more infatuated with her? We could argue that Ḥemdat is simply not interested in Ruḥamah. Perhaps. However, there is a deeper insight here. When Ruḥamah literalizes the story of the mermaid's romantic passion, it only serves to draw more attention to the body, to the physical, which is antithetical to the spiritual sensuousness associated with eros. Ruḥamah's shaved head renders her physicality more conspicuous, real, and all too human, making it impossible for Ḥemdat to spiritualize Ruḥamah, hence moving her farther from his erotic world.

Failing to understand the function of eros, Ruḥamah seems to have learned the lesson that her original sacrifice of shaving her head was simply not extreme enough. A more extreme act of literalization comes toward the end of the story, when Ruḥamah burns her prized possession, her violin. Agnon prepares the reader for this twist in the narrative with a foreboding allusion to the sacrifice of Isaac. Ruḥamah and Ḥemdat are on the beach, and when Ruḥamah wants to grill fish for Ḥemdat, attempting to reenact another story he has told her, Ḥemdat says to her, "I see the fish but where are the fire and the spit to grill them with?" echoing Isaac's similar question in Genesis 22 as he accompanies his father to the site of his sacrifice, "here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"[39] The ominous feeling comes from the anticipation that the violin, an object of art

and beauty and great spiritual value, will be sacrificed here as Ruḥamah cannot find firewood.

When Ruḥamah casts the violin into the fire without any hesitation, she fails again in her attempt to demonstrate herself as an erotic ideal. Ḥemdat recoils in horror, interpreting her gesture as indicating a vacuum of value and imagination. Uncharitably, he sees her as willing to sacrifice the prized violin and its cultural and spiritual significance for something as banal as a dinner of grilled fish. Indeed, there is something absurdly pragmatic in Ruḥamah's act. By pointing out the obvious fact that food is more important than art, her radical gesture represents the assault of materialism on human spiritual aspirations, echoing the famous slogan of the materialist critic Dimitrii Pisarev that a pair of boots is preferable to all the poetry of Shakespeare.[40] Of course, Ruḥamah has missed the point. It is not physical satisfaction that appeals to Ḥemdat. Eros emerges in the games played by the mind.

In that final scene of the violin's sacrifice, Ḥemdat experiences another moment of revelation. Watching the violin's immolation, he remarks, "I watched it going up in smoke and listened to it play as it burned."[41] The entire scene concludes with an allusion to the martyrdom of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon, who was burned by the Romans wrapped in a Torah scroll. When his students asked him, "rabbi, what do you see," he responds, "the scrolls are burning and letters are flying in the air" (b. Avodah Zarah 17b). Likewise, Ḥemdat's revelation during the violin's burning, in which he hears the notes of music escaping the flames, functions to counter Ruḥamah's materialism and reassure Ḥemdat that the spiritual prevails beyond the physical. When the body is burned, the soul—its art and music—survives. Through this, Ḥemdat affirms to himself the value of his own *auto de fe* in the name of eros, the idea that spiritual love like his for Salsibylla is superior to Ruḥamah's materialistic love.

INTERSECTIONS WITH EDGAR ALLAN POE

From the first lines of the narrative of "Leilot," the sand, shadows, stars, and mystery of Jaffa, an untamed and unpredictable town of the sea, coupled with its macabre lover Ḥemdat, seem to set a Poe-inspired mood for the entire story:

> A sea-blue night cloaked the city in silence. My house stood hidden in its secret bower of shadows. At last Jaffa lay to rest. The angry sea was quiet again. No sound could be heard apart from the dull groans of a cricket within the walls of my house. I sat on my doorstep, my head full of thoughts and my eyes shut that I might see what no man has seen with open eyes.[42]

These textual markers and the last line of the opening sequence ("that I might see what no man has seen with open eyes") point us to Poe. In Poe's "The Raven" (1845), the speaker, likewise brooding on a "midnight dreary" and "nightly shore" in darkness says, "Long I stood there wondering, fearing / Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before."[43] Both Agnon's Ḥemdat and Poe's protagonist view themselves, in the pathos and intensity of their erotic longings as being different from realist lovers who are nothing but "mere mortals."

Similar to Poe, all the descriptions of characters, places, and events in Agnon's story are colored by the overbearing subjectivity of the protagonist narrator. Real time and real place are not functioning here; rather, it is a world which, as Hillel Weiss writes, is best described as "bewitched."[44] Particularly in the magical nighttime hour, as encapsulated by the story's title, the reader is drawn into an animistic world in which nonhuman entities such as the city, the house, and even the crickets are subjects of the pathetic fallacy that follows the emotional oscillations of Agnon's character.

Wendy Zierler, in her study of Agnon's story "Aḥot" (1922), points out that Poe's character Eleonora, from the story by the same title, published in 1842, as well as the similar-sounding "Lenore" (the lover from Poe's "The Raven"), influenced Agnon's choice to call one of his female characters by the name Eleonora, illustrating his interest in Poe's writing.[45] Discerning how exactly Agnon drew on Poe's "Eleonora" is complicated given the former's tendency to conceal literary influences.[46] Poe's work would most likely have been known to Agnon in German translation, although Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Hebrew rendition of Poe's "The Raven" was published in 1914 and may have circulated among Jewish writers previously.[47] Agnon's extant library in Jerusalem does not contain any of Poe's works, but his larger European library, destroyed by a fire, may have.

The evidence for a connection between Poe and Agnon is thus primarily stylistic and thematic but also supported by the direct reference to the name "Eleonora" given by Agnon to one of his female protagonists. In "Leilot," and to a lesser extent in "Givʿat haḥol," the elements of the physical setting such as the beach, sand, waves, wind, and stars localized in Jaffa are all animated to create a gentle pathetic fallacy: they are alive and foreboding. Likewise, images of birds and fish—Ruḥama's pigeon, the "gay glowing birds," and "silver fish"—appear as mediating devices in the narrative.

The works of both writers feature mystery, obfuscation, and dark eros. Like "Leilot," Poe's "Eleonora" is a first-person account of a male character who is obsessed with a disembodied female ideal. In this semi-autobiographical story, Poe's unnamed narrator tells the story of his youth in the "Valley of the Many-Colored Grass"—an idyllic flower garden away from time and space. In this Edenic and fantastical place, he enjoyed the pure love of the young Eleonora, a character who is free of the degradations of sexuality and the body. Just as Ḥemdat has eschewed all of the real women with whom he has had contact, including the sensual Ruḥamah, in favor of the ideal of Salsibylla, so, too, Poe's protagonist takes a solemn vow to "never bind himself in marriage to any daughter of earth" except for Eleonora.[48] However, because the consummation of his longings for Eleonora through marriage would immediately end the desire and potential for eros in the narrative, Eleonora's death is inevitable. In her dying, however, she is apotheosized into a transcendent ideal. She becomes a spirit that the narrator can worship and whose unexpected and mysterious visitations he enjoys. The spirit of Eleonora makes its presence known to Poe's protagonist in a variety of ways: by appearing with the evening wind, by filling the air of the room with the fragrance of her perfume, and by awakening him from his sleep with the pressing of "spiritual lips upon his lips."[49] Like Ḥemdat, Poe's protagonist goes through life observing solemn obeisances to the ghost of Eleonora. The angels of heaven are active mediators in the relationship until the spirit of Eleonora finally releases him from his vow.

The male protagonist in Poe's "Eleonora" is in the end seduced by the vigor of life, falling in love with a living woman, choosing flesh over spirit. "Leilot" ends too abruptly to reveal Ḥemdat's choice. Agnon's protagonist is ultimately rewarded

through a meeting with Salsibylla, but the final scene at the end of the story is ambiguous:

> A glad sun shone down on the world and the heavens rejoiced with a great joy, for there was a celebration in the heavens above and I too was invited. Yet I did not ascend to the heavens for I was with Salsibylla on earth.
>
> Do you know, Salsibylla, I said, that there is a great celebration today?
>
> Yes, she said, I know.
>
> And can you see what the angels are doing? I said. For the angels were drinking from the wine of paradise and dancing until the sky shook.
>
> Is there no one to give me a glass of wine with which to mark our celebration, Salsibylla?
>
> Someone there is, my brother, said Salsibylla. And as she spoke she placed her mouth upon mine and I drank of the choicest wine. [. . .] "Shall I tell you more of the kind Salsibylla? Or shall I sit by myself and keep silent to remind myself of those wonderful days?[50]

It is not clear what exactly happens in this final passage. The first question for the reader is whether Agnon's description of the encounter between Ḥemdat and Salsibylla, in Ḥemdat's own recollection, is a plot event that actually transpired or a product of Ḥemdat's imagination. Is it the description of a dream? Or is it Ḥemdat's vision of heaven and the world to come with his talk of angels and a heavenly celebration that rocks the sky? Ḥemdat insists, however, that he "did not ascend to heaven," as he "was with Salsibylla on earth." In possibly suggesting a grounded materialization of Salsibylla and a real union, could the narrative be breaking the erotic tension so painstakingly built up until this point? I suggest reading the ending of this story in an ironic light. Agnon's conclusion has Ḥemdat assume the literalizing role of Ruḥamah as he drinks the fine wine of Salsibylla with which her name is associated. In the approach to the transcendent ideal, Ḥemdat, the eros-maker himself, symbolically reenacts, and to an extent, literalizes, his own fantasy. Thus, the dynamics between realism and fiction are reproduced at ever higher levels of interpretation.

CONCLUSION

I have argued in this article, following de Rougemont, that the desired telos of eros cannot be realized in literature without the end of eros. As a result, the text must terminate either in the diegetic death of the erotic object or in the diegetic dissolution of the erotic through marriage or other means. One particular element in the ending of Agnon's "Leilot" affirms this and suggests that to preserve eros it is necessary to escape from realism—in other words, from narratives intended to be accurate depictions of events experienced by a narrator. Eros can be preserved with a flight to mystery and mythmaking through the refusal of the storyteller to end the narrative.

At the conclusion of Ḥemdat's first-person stream of longing, Agnon addresses the reader in Ḥemdat's voice and asks, "shall I tell you more of the kind Salsibylla?," as if asking the reader for permission to continue telling the story. If answered in the affirmative, the story of Ḥemdat and Salsybilla's romance and of Agnon's creation of eros in language, can continue to develop indefinitely.

I have sought to demonstrate here, with my reading of Agnon's "Leilot," that language evokes eros much like it approaches the description of mystical revelation: the closer one gets, the more elusive and blurred it becomes. We have observed that eros borrows structures from the realm of spirituality such as belief in the metaphysical, the sacred, and the observance of ritual. The language of eros, therefore, is one in which mystery and obfuscation take precedence over realism. This allows both the author and reader to explore human experiential territory that defies description through ordinary language and literary realism.

NOTES

1 Hillel Weiss, "ʿAd sheyafuaḥ hayom. ʿAl hatemahilim besippurei haʾahavah," *Yeda ʿam* 75–78 (2015): 46.

2 Weiss, "ʿAd sheyafuaḥ hayom," 46.

3 Alan Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa: The Myth of the Artist as a Young Man," *Prooftexts* 1, no. 1 (1981): 62–83.

4 Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Pantheon, 1956).

5 Edgar Allan Poe, "Eleonora," in *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Knopf Doubleday, 2012), 513–617.

6 Hillel Weiss, "Kol hemdat haʿolam beyado," *Hador* (2012): 80–81.

7 Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa," 68.

8 See description of Werther in Claudia Durst Johnson and Vernon Johnson, *The Social Impact of the Novel: A Reference Guide* (Greenwood, 2002), 170.

9 Marina Zilbergerts, *The Yeshiva and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature* (Indiana University Press, 2022), 140–43.

10 Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa," 67.

11 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, "Nights," trans. Hillel Halkin, *Prooftexts* 1, no. 1 (1981): 92.

12 Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa," 78.

13 Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa," 82.

14 Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa," 81 and Ruth Netzer, *The Whole, the Fragment, and Its Repetition* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2009), 192.

15 Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa," 80.

16 Robert Alter, "Sod hageʾonut shel Shai ʿAgnon," *Midah* (February 7, 2020), 1–9.

17 Adin Steinsaltz, "The Song of Songs," in *On Being Free* (Jason Aronson, 1995), 133.

18 Robert Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York: Behrman House, 1975), 227.

19 Ilana Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

20 Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers*, 27–30.

21 Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers*, 28.

22 Agnon, "Nights," 85, 90.

23 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* (Schocken, 1967), 390.

24 Haim Weiss, "Liqro et ʿAgnon Hagaʾon," *Moznayim* (June 2017), 83.

25 Agnon, *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*, 390.

26 Laurence Coupe, cited in Roman Katsman, "Meḥol Hamitusim," in *Maʾaseh sippur* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), 434–35.

27 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. George Gibian, 2nd ed. (Norton, 1995), 136.

28 de Rougemont, *Love*, 42.

29 See comparison chart in Tamar Shinboim, "Lehavin et kol hademuyot bevat aḥat," *ʿAyin gimel*, *ketav ʿet lemeḥqar yetsirat ʿAgnon* 1 (2011): 168.

30 For comparison to the Jungian notion of "anima" as the feminine emanation see Netzer, *The Whole, the Fragment, and Its Repetition*, 191.

31 Agnon, "Nights," 85.

32 Song of Songs 7:1. I am grateful to Wendy Zierler for pointing out the connections to Lamentations, the Book of Ruth, as well as the significance of the female characters' names.

33 Agnon, "Nights."

34 Agnon, "Nights."

35 Agnon, "Nights," 87.

36 Agnon, "Nights," 87.

37 Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa," 79–80.

38 Agnon, "Nights," 89.

39 Agnon,"Nights," 94 and Genesis 22:7.

40 Cited in Nikolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (University of Michigan Press, 1969), 56.

41 Agnon, "Nights," 94.

42 Agnon, "Nights," 84.

43 Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven* (Dutton, 1883), 4.

44 Weiss, "Kol ḥemdat haʿolam," 47.

45 Wendy Zierler, "Towards a Sisterhood of the Pen: Sister Stories by Agnon and Baron" (Conference on the 100th Anniversary of Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon's *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*, Northwestern University, Chicago, 2022), 10.

46 Alter, "Sod."

47 Aminadav A. Dykman, "Poe's Poetry in Israel (and Russia)," *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism* 33, nos. 1–2 (2000): 33.

48 Edgar Allan Poe, *Thirty-Two Stories* (Hackett, 2000), 178.

49 Poe, *Thirty-Two Stories*, 179.

50 Agnon, "Nights," 95.