Commentary

DECEMBER 1967 CULTURE & CIVILIZATION

Reflections on S. Y. Agnon

In order to understand the genius of a contemporary Hebrew writer such as S. Y. Agnon it is necessary first...

by Gershom Scholem

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE GENIUS OF A CONTEMPORARY HEBREW writer such as S. Y. Agnon it is necessary first to consider the nature of the Hebrew language before it became, once again, a normal means of communication, a language of children playing in the street. Before the present generation, Hebrew was nourished from a different source entirely; it was the language of a great religious tradition, and almost everything written in it made sense in the context of that tradition. This is not to say that the language was peripheral to the Jewish community as a whole. Even after Hebrew (or for that matter Aramaic, which was so closely related to Hebrew that in the Jewish mind it became almost a kind of younger sibling) was no longer in use as a spoken language, it continued to hold its own as a written language, occupying over the centuries a central place in education and in the study of the Bible, the Talmud, and all writings connected with them. Nor did Hebrew remain the province of a numerically small elite, as was the case with Latin. Everyone was expected to have a working knowledge of Hebrew; the study of the Bible and the Talmud was by no means limited to those who intended to become rabbis or judges. In countries where Jewish intellectual and religious life was particularly vigorous—such as Poland, Italy, and Turkey—Hebrew represented the principal means for expressing the spiritual life of an important segment of the male community. It is true that the spark of vitality, which comes to language when it is used and

spoken by women, was lacking, and this lack is indeed significant. What remained, however, was of overwhelming richness. Aside from those books intended for womenfolk that were composed in the vernacular, almost all literary works—chronicles, poetry, and even parody—were written in Hebrew. In these works, biblical and talmudic associations were employed to the hilt; the works abounded in witty and surprising uses of old phrases or in playful variations upon them. Quite often the measure of a Jew's education was not only his command of Bible and Talmud, but his ingenious ability to use the language of these source materials for secular purposes as well.

Modern Hebrew literature, especially in the 19th and in the early part of the 20th centuries, was from the start built on a paradox: it fed on a language of predominantly religious tradition but strove for avowedly secular goals. Writers of considerable talent and some, indeed, of genius, worked mightily to achieve the metamorphosis of Hebrew into a language of secular literature. In its earlier stages this new literature was directed mainly toward criticizing the petrified state of Jewish tradition and the many shortcomings and basic faults of East European Jewish society. Later, however, with the emergence of the Zionist movement, the renascence of Hebrew gravitated toward a more positive goal. A new life was springing up in the old land of Israel and Hebrew literature was to serve as the connecting link between this new society and the disintegrating communities of the Diaspora. Still, even such outstanding representatives of this literary renascence as Bialik, Tchernichowsky, and Shneur, were limited in the means of expression at their disposal. Hebrew had remained a language of literary tradition; despite the fact that these three writers spent their later years in Israel, the spoken Hebrew of the new generation had no formative influence on their work.

Agnon stands at a crossroads in the development of modern Hebrew. Heir to the totality of Jewish tradition, he has given the highest artistic expression to the life of the Jewish people both in the setting of tradition and under the impact of the historic forces which led to the disintegration of that setting. As an artist, Agnon is unequaled, a classical master; but, because of the circumstances of his

time and his position, he is also the last of his line. Having spent most of his creative years in the land of Israel, Agnon has witnessed the development of Hebrew as a "natural" language, spoken at first in consequence of a moral decision made by a small number of utopians, and later by youngsters who grew up in Israel and knew no other language. He has been fully conscious of this process, and he knows that the metamorphosis which Hebrew has undergone has involved a decisive loss of form. When language is no longer forged, first and foremost, by the study of texts and through conscious reflection, but rather by unconscious processes in which the power of tradition is a minor factor at best, that language becomes by nature chaotic. Indeed, the chaotic quality of present-day Hebrew was already apparent forty years ago, when Agnon returned from Europe to settle permanently in Israel; one day it may become the vehicle of expression of a new literary genius, but by then it will be essentially different, in its means and potentialities, from the Hebrew language whose forms and cadences are immortalized in the prose of Agnon.

For the most obvious result of the regeneration of Hebrew as a natural language has been the sloughing off of its heavy load of historical overtones, accumulated through three thousand years of sacred literature. Hebrew words have acquired a new virginity; they are ready now to be molded into new contexts, from which the old and sometimes oppressive odor of sanctity has evaporated. This is precisely what Hebrew writers of the last two generations have tried to do. Yet the burdens of history, which these writers feel in their bones, have asserted themselves even in revolt. In this respect today's writers, for whom the Bible is no longer a holy book but a national saga, and to whom rabbinical and medieval literature is virtually unknown, are in a happier situation than Agnon and his contemporaries. They are free to wrestle with the words in a completely new emotional setting and on a level of freedom previously unattainable. They are, it is true, confronted with dangers of rebirth that are no less awesome than those of birth. Nobody can foretell what will come of this sweep and whirl in terms of literature. For the time being, at least, nothing is audible but stammering. Much of Agnon's work is contemporary with these first stammerings, and there is even a secret mutuality between the two camps, the one of a writer who defends the

most advanced outpost of the Hebrew language in its old forms, and the other manned by pioneers of the unbroken land that stretches beyond. The anarchic vitality, the lawlessness and roughness of the new language, has alarmed and frightened Agnon and appears as an object of scorn and irony in quite a few of his stories. But the reader of Agnon cannot help feeling that a good deal of the master's work was produced as a kind of desperate incantation, an appeal to those who would come after him. It is as though he were saying: "Since you do not accept the continuity of tradition and its language in their true context, take them in the transformation which they have undergone in my work, take them from someone who stands at the crossroads and can see in both directions."

II

I have tried to examine the condition of Hebrew and Hebrew literature so far as it is germane to the task of placing Agnon's work in our time. But to understand the work we must also take a look at its author. For both, to say the least, are enigmatic. It is small wonder that over the last forty years a considerable literature of interpretation on the meaning of Agnon's writings has sprung up in which widely differing and even contradictory points of view have been argued. The commentators have indulged in much overinterpretation, some of it invited by the seeming contradictions in Agnon's writings. These commentators concentrate upon one point: Agnon's attitude toward the historical, or better, religious, tradition of Judaism. Is he to be considered a spokesman for this tradition, a herald delivering its message in highly articulate form, or should we regard him rather as an accomplished artist who uses tradition to express all the intricacies of the life of a Jew in our time, proffering no easy answer to the old question: where are we going? Is he a great defender of the faith, as the Orthodox have acclaimed him? Is he some kind of existentialist genius, showing the emptiness of all fullness and the fullness of emptiness? Is he like the king of the Moors who filled his palace with portraits of white men, setting up an ideal which he is fully conscious can never be attained in our times? Agnon himself,

for all his great conversational gifts, has been very reticent when it comes to these questions. He is not a man to commit himself. He has delivered his work and left his readers the task of coming to terms with it, his commentators the task of fighting it out among themselves; and, I should say, he rather enjoys the spectacle. As a matter of fact, having known Agnon for fifty years, I can testify that his own outlook has undergone great changes over the years, and I doubt whether any single harmonizing view would do him justice. He was not what could be called an observant Jew when I knew him first, but even then he gave the impression of being a bearer of spiritual tradition. Now, in his later years, when he has become an observant Jew, he still gives the impression of being a man of complete intellectual freedom and of utterly unorthodox mind.

This is confirmed by the story of his life. He began writing as a youth, more than sixty years ago. He grew up in Buczacz in Eastern Galicia (now Western Ukraine), an old and settled community of no more than eight thousand Jews and a center of rabbinic scholarship. He came from a family of scholars some of whom strictly opposed Hasidism and all it represented, but some of whom embraced it. His childhood reflected both these worlds, which made up the combined physiognomy of Jewish piety in 19th-century Galicia. He had hardly any schooling outside traditional talmudic education; his father was his main teacher in the study of the Talmud. He spent the years of adolescence in the local study house, which boasted a tremendous Hebrew library. He became an ardent and omnivorous reader of old talmudic tomes, to which he began writing notes and glosses. But at the same time he started producing stories and poems in the style of the writers of the *Haskala*, the rationalist movement which was attempting to introduce enlightenment and European culture into Hebrew. Galicia was then one of the centers of neo-Hebrew literature, and its writers enjoyed a great reputation as masters of Hebrew style. Still a lad, Agnon joined the ranks of the Zionists, beginning his literary career in local Hebrew and Yiddish journals which have long since disappeared. An older friend, Eliezer Meir Lipschuetz, to whom he remained attached to the end, used to say to him: “Make up your mind what you propose to be, a writer of talmudic notes, *hiddushim* and *pilpulim*, or a writer of stories and a poet.” Agnon made his

choice early. But Yiddish soon lost its hold on him, and after going to Palestine in 1907 (not in 1909, as is often erroneously stated), he never again resorted to it as a vehicle of literary expression.

His lifelong struggle with Hebrew as both the matter and the form of his inspiration took shape in those first supreme efforts of his literary genius which were published in Palestine in the years preceding World War I. Their impact was instantaneous. The first story by him to be printed in Palestine, a lyrical and melancholy tale called *Agunot* ("Deserted Souls"), remains a classical piece of imaginative Hebrew writing to this day. Those with an ear for Hebrew prose—and there were quite a few of them in Palestine in those days—realized immediately the unique brilliance of the young writer. Shalom Streit, in 1913, said of *Agunot*: "An electric current ran through our community at its reading." No Hebrew writer before had dared begin a short story with a lengthy quotation from what purported to be one of the old forgotten books, or to use that citation as a leitmotif running through the entire story. Even more paradoxical was Agnon's publishing history in those years. The weekly newspaper of the socialist *Hapo'el Hatza'ir*, a group strongly influenced by Tolstoyan and *narodniki* ideas, published Agnon's first book, *Vehaya he'akov lemishor* ("And the Crooked shall be made Straight") in a series of installments. The story develops an Enoch Arden theme in a strictly traditional hasidic framework; it is written not so much in the actual style of the old devotional literature as in the style its authors would have used had they been great artists. Joseph Haim Brenner, a convinced atheist who was the first to recognize Agnon's literary genius, scraped together his last shillings to publish the story in book form (1912); the man who set it in type was an ardent follower of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, one of the great saints of Hasidism. It is on record that both these men took the greatest delight in the work, thereby anticipating, so to speak, the contradictory attitudes taken by Agnon's admirers in later years. For Brenner, "And the Crooked shall be made Straight" was the first work of secular Hebrew literature in which tradition had become the medium of pure art, untouched by extraneous factors such as criticism of, or apologetics for, Jewish society. For the typesetter, whom I have known for many years, it was a true embodiment of hasidic lore and spirit.

In the formative years of his first stay in Palestine, Agnon indeed felt at home in both these camps. He lived with ease among the pioneers of the Second *aliya* who wished to revitalize the Jewish people through the Tolstoyan religion of work and humanistic renewal, rather than through social revolution. He accepted their vision of Zionism as the only hope for a Jewish future. But at the same time he could establish close relations with the representatives of traditional piety. There was, no doubt, a difference of nuance in his attitude toward the two camps. He had consciously left the world of tradition as he had known it in his youth, but he was saturated with the spirit of this world. From the vantage-point of Zionism, a movement which endeavored to transform its essential ethos, this life, and the men and women who represented it, seemed to clamor for someone to give it shape. The charmed world of the old *yishuv*, the pre-Zionist settlers, in those years certainly held no message for the young Agnon so far as his own vision of the renascence of the Jewish people was concerned, but it provided him with a great store of characters and with an atmosphere of strange excitement. The life of centuries seemed to have been arrested here in a curious mixture of immortality and decay. And the encounter challenged the young artist, who recognized a submerged part of himself in this world.

Having absorbed what Jewish Palestine could offer him at that stage of his development, and longing to dissociate himself as well from the other center of his experience, Galicia, Agnon in 1913 went to Germany. He had meant to stay for a few years at most, but the war overtook him and it was not until 1924 that he returned to settle in Jerusalem. Agnon's years in Germany were of the greatest importance to his work. German Jews left him baffled. Curious as he was about them, he could not become involved with them in any deep sense, as he had been involved, say, with Galicia. He was an exile who at the same time felt the exhilaration of a man who knows where he belongs. He was still an inveterate reader, and when I first saw him, it was in the excellent library of the Jewish Community in Berlin where, as he told me, he was looking for books he

had not yet read. At this time, too, he made his principal contact with European literature. His natural inclination to perfectionism became quite pronounced in this period; he wrote and rewrote his stories six or seven times, a trait which was to become the bane of his publisher. He published very little during those years, but he worked indefatigably both at revising his older stories and at writing new ones. He also wrote a great amount of poetry and a long autobiographical novel in which he took critical stock of his earlier years and the ideas and movements which had shaped them. The only chapter of this work which has been preserved and published contains one of the most bitter and devastating pictures we have of Galician Zionism in the period of Agnon's youth.

In June 1924, all of Agnon's manuscripts and papers, together with his wonderful Hebrew library, were completely destroyed by a fire which broke out in his house in Homburg (near Frankfurt). Agnon was never the same after this cataclysmic event; indeed, who can fathom the impact of such a blow on the personality of a great artist? Starting from scratch again, he gave up writing poetry and never tried to reconstruct his lost novel. He simply surrendered what was lost, prepared a semi-final version of his published writings, and turned to new beginnings out of the depths of his creative imagination.

Upon his return to Palestine, Agnon developed a deep allegiance to Jerusalem and an appropriately conservative way of life. In the ensuing quarter-century he returned to the Diaspora only once, after his house in a suburb of Jerusalem had been pillaged by Arabs during the riots of 1929. This time, he went for a short visit to his home town in Galicia, and for a longer stay of nearly a year in Germany to see through the press the first four volumes of his collected works, which had taken five years to prepare. This was his last encounter with Europe and European Jews, and it left a sharp imprint on his mind. In fact, there was no further need for him to travel to the Diaspora—the Diaspora was coming to Palestine, in ever larger waves of *aliya*. His work now took on wider dimensions.

It is relevant in this connection to mention Agnon's peculiar gifts as an anthologist. This activity has been much more than a mere sideline in his

creative work as a writer. Agnon was never a scholar in the sense of a person dedicated to historical and critical analysis and to the study of phenomena within a conceptual framework. Nevertheless, he has always had a penchant for scholarship, enamored as he is of the study of primary sources. He has a wonderful feel for the significant and the curious in the vast realm of Hebrew literature, and a talent for synthesis. During his years in Germany he edited, in German, two anthologies, *The Book of the Polish Jew* and *The Book of Hanukkah*. In Jerusalem, he devoted a considerable amount of work and time to three anthologies which represent a perfect intermingling of his propensities for scholarship and connoisseurship with his ambitions as a writer and a master of form. In their way, these anthologies are also outstanding examples of creative work. The first of them is *Days of Awe*, "Being a treasury of traditions, legends, and learned commentaries concerning Rosh Ha-shanah, Yom Kippur, and the days between, culled from three hundred volumes ancient and new"; an abridged edition of this work exists in English. With his caustic sense of humor Agnon included in *Days of Awe* a number of highly imaginative (and imaginary) passages culled from his own vineyard, a non-existent book, *Kol Dodi* ("The Voice of my Beloved"), innocently mentioned in the bibliography as a "Manuscript, in possession of the author." The second anthology is comprised of stories and anecdotes about books and their authors—a compendium that reflects Agnon's unquenchable thirst for the anecdotal side of Jewish bibliography. For some unfathomable reason, the book has never been published except in a private edition. The last of these anthologies is a collection of sayings about the Ten Commandments. Agnon has given years of his life to the preparation of these works; in them, the pure voice of tradition speaks in tones of laconic refinement.

Many years ago Agnon also planned a thesaurus of hasidic stories on which he had agreed to cooperate with Martin Buber. He commenced the work in Homburg, but the first batches of the manuscript fell victim to the flames, and he never returned to it. Yet his forays into scholarship continued unabated. It is noteworthy that the only great Hebrew writer with whom Agnon felt perfectly at ease was the poet, Haim Nahman Bialik, who shared with Agnon a propensity

for creative anthologizing. As a matter of fact, Agnon never felt as comfortable in the company of writers as he did in that of scholars who, surprisingly enough, appear as central figures in some of his strangest stories. The calling of the writer seems to have held no mysteries, whereas the utter and largely hopeless devotion of the scholar obviously filled him with sinister fascination.

III

Many critics have rightly observed the obvious tension between the artist and the traditionalist in Agnon. It is of his essence. When he began writing he himself was far from a traditional Jew, but he deliberately set out to use Jewish tradition as the material of his fiction. This he did in two ways: on the one hand he penetrated ever deeper into the intricacies of this tradition, its grandeur and its ambivalences; and on the other hand he sought to begin, as it were, from the insecurity, the *Verlorenheit* and alienation of the modern Jew who attempts to come to terms with himself without the guidance of a tradition that has anyway ceased to be meaningful. The ellipse of Agnon's work moves between two poles, the world of Buczacz and Polish Jewry, and the world of the new settlements in the land of Israel. Both of these worlds are portrayed in Agnon's work on the two levels I have mentioned above—a circumstance which has proved rather confusing to many of his readers. The world of established Jewish values and the world of utter confusion, which on occasion seem to be separated by two or three generations, in reality partake of many similar characteristics. For all its apparent simplicity, there are great tensions even within the world of tradition; and although disintegration and contusion seem to be the predominant feature of the writer's own times, here too a delicate equilibrium may be found. A forlorn little town like Buczacz could still contain an entire universe of human passion and ambition, of infinite richness and abysmal tragedy, just as the struggle for a new life in the old land could include all the infinite ambiguities of Zionism.

Agnon began by writing short stories, and it is in this mode that he has achieved a perfection which leaves the reader breathless. More than twenty years of intense productivity passed before he published his first long book, a chronicle of Jewish life in hasidic Galicia nearly a hundred and fifty years ago which in many ways stands on the borderline between a story and a novel, being itself comprised of what the author calls "stories within a story." Many of these first stories, which gained Agnon a wide reputation and which must be considered classics of their kind, are legends of the Jewish past. The secret of their perfection lies in Agnon's compression of an infinite wealth of detail into infinitesimal space. Unsurpassed in this respect are his masterpieces of fiction in the third volume of his collected writings; many of these tales are suffused with an atmosphere of immense sadness, while at the same time they hold out a promise of consolation. There is, for example, the story of Azriel Moshe the Porter, an ignoramus who grows enamored of the books in the great library of the Beth Hamidrash and teaches himself the titles of all the books whose contents he will never be able to grasp; this Azriel Moshe becomes the keeper of the library, dying a martyr's death while shielding the books with his body in the hour of persecution. Another story concerns an impoverished vinegar maker, all alone in the world, who saves up diligently in order to make his way to the Holy Land; uncertain as to where he should hide his money for safekeeping, he places it in an almsbox under a crucifix on the road. Upon coming finally to fetch his cache, the vinegar maker is arrested for robbing sacred funds. He is imprisoned and condemned to die, but is visited in his cell by "that man," as Jesus is called in Hebrew, who takes him to Jerusalem, where he is found dead by his compatriots.

Through the years Agnon has produced a great number of these stories of short or medium length. Some focus on a single episode, while in others an entire drama is condensed into a dense narrative. I have mentioned some examples of the former. Among the dramatic kind, it is difficult to say which deserves the greatest praise. In my opinion, three such stories by Agnon are of the highest possible merit. They are "The Legend of the Scribe," "The Doctor's Divorce," and "Two Scholars who Lived in our Town." The first tells of a Torah scribe whose

wife yearns for a child and asks her husband to intercede with Heaven in her behalf. But she dies before her hope is granted. The scribe, whose craft is described with much hasidic and kabbalistic detail, writes a Torah scroll in her memory and, having finished it, dies on the night of *Simhat Tora* in an ecstatic-erotic vision of his wife. The story is told without any psychological overtones but with a full account of the dramatic tension in the life of Raphael the Scribe. It is one of Agnon's few stories done in a solemn style—as if it were itself a ceremonial narrative written on a sacred scroll. I vividly recall the evening at the Hebrew Club of Berlin, in the spring of 1917, when Agnon read this story in manuscript. I can still hear the mournful and monotonous intonation of his recitation—a tone of voice reminiscent of that used in the synagogue by the reader who recites the weekly prophetic lesson.

The other two stories are quite different. In the one, a Viennese doctor marries a nurse who has told him that before meeting him she has had an affair with another man. He cannot live with this knowledge, and his deep and genuine love for the woman is gradually eroded from within. "Two Scholars who Lived in our Town" follows the lives of two friends who labor under an ever darkening shadow—caused by a slight, unkind remark made quite inadvertently by one of them in the course of a casual conversation. One of the friends, Rabbi Shlomo, tries in vain to placate the silent but inexorable enmity of his friend Rabbi Moshe Pinhas, whose heart has been hurt beyond repair, and whose bitterness grows with every new step taken by his friend toward reconciliation. Both are first-rank talmudists, but the two of them cannot live together in one place, neither in this world nor in the next. The story is told with uncanny logic and psychological insight. Its message—that the light of the Torah is not enough to warm a frozen heart—is brought home not with the scornful bitterness that any earlier Hebrew writer would have injected into the tale, but with a depth of understanding and objectivity which make it one of the greatest monuments of modern Hebrew literature.

———————

Human passions are of central importance in Agnon's work. Yet, with some rare and remarkable exceptions, Agnon's writing is distinguished by a singular stillness, by the absence of pathos or exaltation. His narrators hardly ever raise their voice, nor is there the slightest hint in his work of expressionistic hysteria. Not infrequently he describes situations which appear to cry out for such treatment, but he never relinquishes the still, small voice which has become the hallmark of his prose. The overriding sobriety of rabbinic style, as it is evinced in the *midrash* and the *mishna*, has of course had a decisive influence upon Agnon's writing, and the absence of exuberance or emotionalism in his work may in good measure be traced to that influence. This is particularly true of his hasidic stories. The task of describing the impact of mysticism on Jewish life led almost every Hebrew writer before Agnon to indulge in highly charged emotional language; Agnon himself, however, deeply steeped as he is in the unemotional prose of kabbalistic literature, has been able to respond to this challenge in a different way. The highstrung sentimentality that characterizes the hasidic tales of I. L. Peretz, for example, is nowhere to be found in Agnon, who treats the world of the hasidim with a kind of perfect bonhomie and urbanity. In his hasidic stories the realm of the miraculous is closely interwoven with stark reality. Moreover, it is not the saints and their ecstatic raptures who are the authentic objects of Agnon's interest, but the little man, the faithful member of the hasidic community for whom all aspects of life are at the same time real and full of mystery.

Withal, the ground on which the pious Jew treads is thin enough. Dark powers lurk everywhere, and the magic of the Law scarcely suffices to keep them at bay. Once the ground of belief cracks, any man, be he within the domain of the Law or outside it, becomes prey to the demons which may or may not be extensions of his own uncertainties and confusions. Agnon, who has given great attention to this side of human experience, takes no stand as to the precise nature of the arena in which these strange happenings occur. His stories about such uncanny experiences, told with utmost lucidity and realistic simplicity, are gathered in his *Book of Deeds* or *Book of Happenings*, a collection which has aroused much controversy because of its obvious affinities to the tales of Kafka.[1] Some see

these stories as a direct opposition to those other works of Agnon in which the world of tradition, even in its most ambiguous form, is depicted in sharp relief. Others maintain that they form a complement to his earlier *oeuvre*, while still others prefer to take no notice at all of this disturbing book. But that it is meant to express something of the greatest relevance to Agnon's purpose is clear. The paradox which inheres in every step that a man tries to take is symbolized in the utter incongruity of the title itself, for what the book stresses is precisely the impossibility of performing even the smallest deed without becoming enmeshed in an inexorable jumble and confusion from which there is no logical escape; only a *deus ex machina*, or the act of waking up as from an oppressive dream, can bring the experience described in this work to some sort of resolution. In fact, some of these stories seem to me to be simply that: descriptions of dreams. But the dreamlike quality which they evoke applies to the most elementary happenings in life. The storyteller wishes to mail a letter, for instance, or goes to meet a friend, but these prove to be hopeless undertakings. What impedes him cannot be defined: it may be the simplest obstructions of everyday life, or it may be a nightmare of surrealistic proportions. We can be sure of nothing, neither in real life nor in the spheres of transcendence. That all this should be said by a writer who is in full command of a heritage whose absence or inaccessibility has frequently been noted as the determining characteristic of Kafka's universe, should certainly set us thinking. But Agnon was not the first to recognize, or to be shocked by, the permeability of tradition. He could, and possibly did, learn much about this notion from the teachings and the famous tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav. The "Story of the Seven Beggars," one of Rabbi Nahman's greatest tales, could easily have been the work of Agnon; in such a case it would have seemed to the modern eye to exhibit a perfectly Kafkaesque quality.

IV

After his return to Jerusalem, Agnon produced a number of full-length novels. The most outstanding of them might perhaps more aptly be described as

chronicles of Jewish life in the one hundred years between 1830 and 1930; in a way they form a trilogy which, for all the diversity of its parts, is bound together by the unity of historical dynamics. I refer to his three novels, *The Bridal Canopy* (1931), *Wayfarer Stopped for the Night* (1940), and *Not Long Ago* (1946). It is a pity that as of now only the first is available in English translation.

The Bridal Canopy describes the adventures of Rabbi Judel Hasid, who wanders throughout Eastern Galicia to collect a dowry for his daughters. Rabbi Judel is the perfect embodiment of hasidism in its prime. He is at home in the Holy Books and in the sayings of the great Zaddikim, and these constitute for him the true face of reality; whatever happens to him on his travels serves to confirm his belief in their truth. (Agnon being a craftsman who takes his details seriously, each and every ceremony or superstition recorded in *The Bridal Canopy* is in strict conformity with the literary sources. The rabbis who are quoted by Judel are flesh and blood, and their books exist.) Rabbi Judel's is a serenity of mind which can never be perturbed, despite the most extraordinary events which befall him and his coachman, who plays Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote. The assurances of the holy Rabbi of Apta (who has sent him on his way) mean more to him than all the vicissitudes and adversities of life. I noted before that Agnon's stories, especially those of his early years, are suffused with an atmosphere of great sadness. In *The Bridal Canopy*, Agnon's delicate humor comes to the fore. He never offers the slightest criticism of his hero's conduct, which involves him in an unending chain of absurdities. Dialogue and situation speak for themselves. It is significant that the first stories of Agnon's *Book of Deeds* were composed at about the same time as *The Bridal Canopy*. They are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. Much of the naked absurdity of the *Book of Deeds* is already present in *The Bridal Canopy* where, however, the absurdity is redeemed by humor and, finally, by a miracle at which Kafka himself would have been the last to be surprised.

The Bridal Canopy is a rich canvas of Jewish life before the impact of modern times, a canvas painted in precise and colorful detail. But that life was not destined to last. Eighty years later, the scene had changed radically. Yitzhak

Kummer, the hero of *Not Long Ago*, is the grandson of Rabbi Judel. Hasidism, and Jewish tradition for that matter, have now broken up. The magnificent impulse has been exhausted and a new ideal, the reconstruction of the Jewish people in its old land, now arouses the enthusiasm of the young. It is a revolutionary beginning, although it purports to be, at the same time, a continuation of the past. No one knows what the place of religious tradition will be in the new order. Religion, too, is manifestly in a state of crisis. Where it still lingers on—and it certainly does in no small measure—it keeps within closed boundaries and has little or no attraction for the outsider. Hasidism was the last great social reality, the last example of a Judaism powered from within by the living force of a great idea. At the beginning of the 20th century, Zionism was to be the new driving ideology, born out of the crisis of Jewish life in the Diaspora. But the birth-pangs of the new Jewish society were to be cruel indeed.

This is the atmosphere which is brought to life in Agnon's masterpiece. Everything is in transition and flux. Yitzhak Kummer, the hero, cannot find his place, even though he is prepared to take upon himself any chore required of him in the life of the new *yishuv* in Palestine. He moves between two societies, the old one in Jerusalem and the new one in Tel Aviv and in the agricultural settlements. The positive aspects of the new society are visible more or less only as background. Agnon in fact planned to make the life of those young pioneers in the new settlements the center of another novel, as promised at the end of *Not Long Ago*. But the work has not yet appeared. Thus we are left only with the tribulations of a lost soul in a new society, described by Agnon with a keen sense of the melancholy emptiness that lurked behind the busy bustle of life in Jewish Palestine. Kummer is forever seeking some fulfillment whose substance he cannot define. He comes to Jerusalem and is strangely attracted by its haunting atmosphere. His adventures there—adventures of a restless seeker after redemption in a stagnant environment—are the core of the book. He strives to reestablish a genuine relation to the world of tradition, which appears to hold out to him some great promise of comfort. But it is all in vain. The effort is plagued from the start, as is made symbolically clear in the surrealistic goings-on between Kummer and a stray dog, in which an incidental joke ends in

tragedy. Kummer is utterly unaware of what he has done to the dog on whose back he jokingly wrote, with the remaining paint in his brush, the words "*kelev meshugga*," "mad dog." This inscription, unknown to the dog, becomes the instrument by which the hero's life, as well as that of the dog, is destroyed. Yitzhak Kummer's quest ends in failure and tragedy. A new life had been proclaimed by Zionism, but it would be too much to say that anywhere in Agnon's work has it been seen to be attained. In fact, Zionism in Agnon's writings is basically a noble failure, whereas everything else in Jewish life is a sham. As for the old life, with all its past glory, there is, in our own time, no way back. Agnon's stories and novels move between these two unattainable poles. Nostalgia is no solution. To be conscious of the greatness of our past does not help us unlock our own problems. A key may indeed exist, but the locksmith who could forge it has yet to be found.

Nowhere is this tension between past and future depicted with greater precision than in the last volume of Agnon's trilogy, the novel *Wayfarer Stopped for the Night*. Whereas *Not Long Ago* is placed in the years before World War I, this book chronicles a visit which the narrator, after twenty years of absence, pays to his home town ten years after the close of hostilities. It is the most melancholy book in Agnon's *oeuvre*. The Hebrew original appeared in 1939, two years before the community portrayed in the book was physically destroyed by the Germans. But what we see here is the death of a Jewish town before it has drowned in actual blood. The narrator comes for a visit from the land of Israel. That he had once followed the message of Zionism and left his home town was in its time itself a sign of Jewish life in its more positive aspects, for the struggle and polemics of those days had a direction and a meaning. But now, life in Szybuscz—a name which is but a thin disguise for Buczacz—has become empty, idle, and miserable; the town is perishing in resignation and resentment, and even the promises of Zionism have become questionable. It is the year 1930, and the narrator himself has suffered during the Arab riots of 1929 in Jerusalem. There is no ultimate purpose to his visit, and his coming is but that of a wayfarer

stopped for the night. Clearly the attraction of his native town, where so much of himself is rooted, has never left him, but he does not find what he has come for. He encounters instead the horror of decline and decay, a horror no less sinister for its ignorance of the murder yet to come.

The narrator arrives full of vivid memories of his town as it was in his youth. It is the utter incongruity of the old and the new which is at the center of his narrative. At every step, remembrance of things past intertwines with the present experience of the visitor. Confronted with the sad reality of decline, he tries to establish a continuity with a past that has gone forever. If, as I have said, Rummer's efforts in Jerusalem failed, all the more so are the narrator's attempts in Szybuscz doomed to failure. The illusionary character of his life becomes ironically visible in the course of the narrative. His nostalgia focuses upon the old house of study, whose key is delivered to him with a disdainful shrug by its last keepers just as they set out to emigrate into the wide world. The only people he can attract to fill it again are those who are too poor to heat their own homes during the long winter, and who come to warm themselves in the old place where the heating is paid for by the narrator. Finally, the key will pass from the narrator to a Communist who had gone to Palestine ten years before as an ardent Zionist but after enduring much suffering and disappointment had returned to his old town. The debit side of Zionism—the reign of empty phrases and high-sounding oratory from which no action follows—finds its spokesman in him. The narrator leaves this Zionist-turned-Communist with a new key—the old one having mysteriously disappeared—and sets out on his return trip to Palestine. Upon his arrival in Jersualem the old key turns up rather surprisingly, but perhaps not quite so surprisingly, in the narrator's bag. In contradistinction to *Not Long Ago*, then, this novel suggests that there is indeed a key, even though it fits nowhere in the new country. But there is a secret hint, however slight, of messianic restoration and integration, as is indicated in the old talmudic saying: "Even the houses of study and the synagogues in exile are destined to be transplanted to the land of Israel."

As I have noted, the efforts of the narrator to establish a genuine and living

relationship to the people of his town, especially those he has known in his youth or their relatives, are in the main unsuccessful. The reason may be that there is no longer any true reality in Sczybucz and that life there has a somewhat ghostlike quality. But another factor may also be involved: most surprisingly, the narrator's mind is set on the restoration of the past. He comes as a visitor from the new world but he brings with him no message to lend his visit meaning or effect. It is not only the people he encounters who are slow and inflexible; he himself succumbs to this atmosphere and becomes a part of it. Although he befriends a group of *halutzim* who are preparing themselves for their *aliya* to Palestine, his visit to them remains a romantic interlude. The silence and unresponsiveness of most of the other people he meets exercise a much greater attraction for him. His heart goes out to them in love and sincere affection. Somewhere in his tale the narrator says: "When I was young I could see in my mind all I wished to see; nowadays, I do not see either what I wish to see or even what I am shown." What, then, does he see? That is what the book is about.

V

I have dealt with some highlights of Agnon's work before he fully realized the impact and significance of the destruction of European Jewry. The main body of his later work has not yet been collected, but is scattered through various journals and daily newspapers. Moreover, much of what he has written is apparently still unpublished. I should like to stress two tendencies which stand out in many of these later writings. There is first of all the predominant wish to emphasize the ritualistic aspects of Jewish life. Formerly, Agnon took this largely for granted. Now, however, there is an almost morbid effort on his part to preserve each and every detail of ritual in his narrative, an effort which rarely is germane to the progress of the particular story being told. For all their breathtaking perfection of language, these details seem to be of greater relevance to students of folklore and Hebrew style than to readers of literature. We observe here a frenzied endeavor to save for posterity the forms of a life

doomed to extinction. It is a sad spectacle.

The second tendency has to do with a curious widening of Agnon's historical perspective. He no longer is content to tell the story of the last four or five generations, but goes back much further, pretending, for instance, to be editing the family papers of his ancestors and thereby covering important episodes in Jewish history over the last four hundred years; or he may relate, as it were, the autobiography of his own soul through its transmigrations since the days of Creation. He sees himself as being present at all stages of biblical and post-biblical history, and gives us eyewitness accounts of the most arresting events over thousands of years, out of a deep sense of identification with the Jewish people. This meta-historical autobiography is contained in a book, *Hadom ve-kissei* ("Stool and Throne"), of which large fragments have been published during recent years. Whereas it may be said with regard to all his preceding work that there was never a total identification of the author with the narrator, this tension is now gone. Gone too is the novelistic element of his prose; narrative has been transformed into a forthright journal of the author's own self. Rather than an unfolding story, we now see events juxtaposed one after the other in separate paragraphs, each under its own heading. It seems to me a most peculiar work, but I would not venture to judge its literary merits before it is published as a whole. One thing, however, is clear. The author's dialectical attitude to his experience and to his tradition, which was so predominant in his earlier work, has been abandoned, and this is a pity. For, if I were to reduce to one formula what I think is the core of Agnon's genius, I would call it the dialectic of simplicity.

---

[1] There are no doubt certain traits which Kafka and Agnon hold in common. Max Brod has said of Kafka: "It was almost impossible to talk to Kafka about abstractions. He thought in images, and spoke in images. He tried to express what he felt simply and in the most direct manner possible, but nevertheless the result was usually very complicated and led to endless speculation without any

real decision." This is precisely true of Agnon, as I have had occasion to note over and over again in our fifty years of acquaintance.