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Israel's Shakespeare: The Literary Canvass of S.Y Agnon

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Considered a national treasure in Israel, the appeal of Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the 1966 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first granted to a Hebrew writer (sharing the honour with Nelly Sachs), has withstood the test of time. And indeed, he occupies an unrivalled place in the pantheon of modern Hebrew literature. Popular as ever, more than forty-five years after his death, Agnon has been feted as one whose standing is akin to that of Shakespeare in England (he has been memorialized on the 50 shekel note as well as on the first commemorative banknote to celebrate Israel's 50th anniversary of independence).

Agnon has been described as "one of the ten most important prose writers of the 20th century and the only one who exploited the brilliance of the Hebrew language and the Jewish tradition."¹ Dedicating himself absolutely to his craft, the self-effacing writer raised Hebrew literature to a global plane, blending authentic Jewish heritage with European sources to present instructive tales that posit a moral and legal conundrum reflective of the modern condition. Andres Osterling, in his Nobel presentation speech, lauded Agnon's reputation as the foremost writer in modern Hebrew literature, noting that the recipient is a:

... realist, but there is always an admixture, which lends to even the greyest and most ordinary scenes a golden atmosphere of strange fairytale poetry ... he stands out as a highly original writer, endowed with remarkable gifts of humour and wisdom, and with a

¹ Gavriel Moked. *Shivchei Adiel Ha'zeh*. Tel Aviv: Schocken Books, 1989: 15.

perspicacious play of thought combined with naïve perception – in all, a consummate expression of the Jewish character.²

As early as 1936, The Jewish Theological Seminary commended Agnon with an honorary Doctor of Hebrew literature degree. A Tel Aviv street and his address bear his name, and on the 100th anniversary of his birth, Israel's parliament convened a special session to honour the wordsmith. In 1950, he won the Ussishkin Prize and the prestigious Israel Prize in 1954 and 1958, as well as the Bialik Prize for Literature bestowed by the city of Tel Aviv. In 1962 the city of Jerusalem made him an honorary citizen, and when in 2002, the National Yiddish Book centre listed their 100 greatest works of Modern Jewish Literature, Agnon's three novels occupied the fourth, fifth and sixth places.³ In addition, his novels and stories feature extensively in Israeli schools as compulsory reading.

Haim Beer, the author of a groundbreaking study of Agnon's relationship with two other Hebrew writers (Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yosef Haim Brenner), offers the following assessment:

Agnon is the centre of our cultural discourse. His work is the most frequent subject of Hebrew literary research. He stands at the juncture of trends and conflicts which make up our life today – Jewish and Hebrew culture, tradition, faith and Jerusalem. Through Agnon, you can relate to a variety of themes.⁴

Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman, who compare his work to that of Joyce and Faulkner, remark that “Many storytellers have arisen to tell the story of East European Jewry,

² The Israel Book Publishers' Bulletin. Issues 5-6. Book Publishers' Association of Israel, 1966: 6.

³ Book awards: The Great 100 Jewish Books from the Yiddish Books Center Judges.”
<https://www.librarything.com/bookaward/The+Great+100+Jewish+Books+from+the+Yiddish+Books+Center+Judges>

⁴ Reuven Rosenfelder. “The Writer's House.” *Jerusalem Post*, March 3, 2000: 13.

but the achievement of SY Agnon remains singular ... Above all, like any great writer, his art transcends the limits of its ostensible subject".⁵

Like a literary archaeologist, Agnon was cognisant of every stratum of Jewish and Hebrew sources. Still, instead of merely absorbing their imprints, his exceptional ability was to transcend them and conjure up visionary and original fictions that unmistakably maintain his imprimatur.

Outside Israel, Agnon is virtually unknown since only a small portion of his writings has been translated. This is principally because of the formidable difficulties involved with translating his idiosyncratic and allusive Hebrew, bristling with wordplays and acrostics, and interlarded with quotations, echoes and references from a galaxy of biblical references. The difficulty of getting across in English the full flavour and profundity of the Agnon prose may account for the reason why the broad, lasting international appreciation accorded to other modernist giants has not been forthcoming, despite the Nobel Prize.

More than anyone else, Agnon advanced the idea of creating not only a new literature in Hebrew but a new culture composed of a synthesis of Eastern European traditions and modern Israeli norms. Agnon was an interpreter of Jewish life, serving as a cultural conduit between the subjective experiences of Eastern European Jewry and its historical national memory. Menachem Ribalow extols Agnon's allegiance to the old life, to the traditions of the Jewish village, and his rejection of the enticing call of the European prophets of the enlightened world:

⁵ Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman. (editors). *A book that was lost and other stories/* by S.Y. Agnon. New York: Schocken Books, 1995.

Like the other authors of his generation, he had drunk deep of the wells of European culture and had sipped the wine of world literature, but he had not become intoxicated. He remained sober and unaffected. His entry on the scene of Hebrew literature was an event of major importance ... he began a counter-revolution. He reversed the trend from Europe homeward again, from alien ways back to the native road ... His novelty lay in his old-fashionedness. His uniqueness consisted in his return to old sources, to the folk character and its traits of simplicity and sincerity, purity and piety.”⁶

Correspondingly, David George concludes that, “Agnon stood at the crossroads between faith and heresy, between exile and redemption, and between the community of pious believers and a new secular community.”⁷

Alan Mintz, who hails Agnon as the greatest Jewish writer of the modern era, believes that Agnon saw life as an ongoing battle between the religious man and the encroaching tide of modernity, mining its plentiful vein to infuse his texts with subtle scepticism regarding his own beliefs: “... his soul was not consumed in the conflagration of apostasy ... he did not leave the crisis of faith behind him. Agnon ingested the crisis and lived with it in his bones and his mind. Rather than cutting himself off from the tradition, he incorporated the conflict and dramatized it within the dynamics of his own ego”⁸

Agnon transmuted the arcane folk traditions into masterworks which served for many as vessels containing new sources of spiritual sovereignty. While Agnon was fixated on the

⁶ Menachem, Ribalow. *The Flowering of modern Hebrew Literature: A Volume of Literary Evaluation*. London: Vision Press, 1959

⁷ Menachem, Ribalow. *The Flowering of modern Hebrew Literature: A Volume of Literary Evaluation*. London: Vision Press, 1959

⁸ Alan Mintz. *Translating Israel: Contemporary Hebrew Literature and its reception in America*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001

gradually fading *shtetl* and the interior life and struggle of the Jew, most Hebrew writers of the time focused on the intensifying secular society, using palpable realism in their fictions. In stating that Agnon's pieces elucidated the psychic predicament of the estranged, enlightened Jew vis-à-vis the circumscribed fibre of the *shtetl*, David Grossberg finds that Agnon "mirrored the plight of the 20th-century modernist living at a far remove from the certainties of the past. Agnon's portrayals added a significant and disquieting dimension to the image of the Jews of the national renewal and Israeli statehood."⁹ In Agnon, the characters live within the tradition rather than trying to escape or change its dimensions.

In studying the enduring brilliance of Agnon, Arnold Band, one of the first critics to write about Agnon's fiction in English, contends that Agnon resists easy pigeonholing and that for some readers he was "the epitome of traditional Jewish-folk literature; for others, he is the most daring of modernists. For the older reader, Agnon conjures up memories of Jewish life in Eastern Europe; for the younger reader, he wrestles with the central universal problems of our agonized century."¹⁰

Anne Golomb Hoffman concurs:

Agnon's is a restless writing ... He has been read by some as a pious storyteller, by others as a modern ironist. He is both and more. Shifting between exile and return, Agnon's writing cannot simply be identified with the ideological enclosures of traditional world views; nor is it characterized by the complete absence of inherited structures.¹¹

Daniel Grossberg. "An introduction to modern Israeli literature," *Midstream*, V49, (May-June 2003): 28-31.

¹⁰ Arnold Band. *Studies in Modern Jewish Literature*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003: 213

¹¹ Mintz Alan and Anne Golmob Hoffman. (editors). *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*, Schoken: New York, 1995.

Often, publications of newly discovered Agnon stories swell the Israeli market, and there is no end to the steady stream of critical discourses, academic commentaries, conferences and lectures on his imposing output of five novels and hundreds of stories. It seems that the academic establishment cannot stop poring over and dissecting his work, increasingly employing the lens of psychoanalytic theory and gender studies to decode his dense, multivalent canon. This, in turn, whets the appetite of an adoring public that devours his work and sees adaptations of his tales into plays. His contribution to the Jewish state is manifested elsewhere than just in the literary realm. Annually, on Yom Kippur, Judaism's holiest day, millions of congregants in synagogues cite the Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel written in 1948 by Agnon, together with Chief Rabbis Yitzhak Herzog and Ben Zion Uziel.

What made Agnon so unforgettable was his erudition in a myriad of fields and his enormous range. This enabled him to charge his literary output with multiplex symbolism, drawing on the fount of biblical-Midrashic sources. Equally impressive was his skill in uncannily spinning prosaic situations into fable-like tales, teasing the nuances and shades in the vast trajectory of life he explored. Agnon charted a terrain that began in the second half of the 18th century and culminated in the 1950s, with an ambit of representation unlimited by cultural or geographical boundaries. On the one hand, he chronicled the disappearing world of European orthodox Jewry, and on the other, the emerging milieu of the Zionist pioneers, the majority of whom were revolting against the long-established tenets of that orthodoxy.

Revered for his protean imagination and creative freedom, he was enormously nourished by the rigid religious tradition he was committed to, integrating and commemorating these roots throughout his career. Sharon Green maintains that the "uniqueness of Agnon is that he was able to capture the richness of traditional life, while at the same time he was clear-

sighted about the dangers such a life holds for Jewish survival in modern times.”¹² Green explains that Agnon’s virtuosity lay in his ability to “hold in creative tension the Jewish religious tradition and the modern-secular world, both of which he shows to be needed for Jews to thrive. The dialectical tension in his work is probably why many readers find his works enigmatic.”¹³ Moreover, the highly allusive style, subtle turns of thoughts and purposeful ambiguity that exude from every passage pose an intimidating challenge to the reader.

To be sure, Agnon’s genius is also to be found in the intense modernism that characterizes his interlocking characters and events, constantly subverting expectations and shifting anticipated perspectives. Never over-explaining, often cryptic and elliptical, Agnon’s paradigmatic texts are open-ended, with variegated interpretations. Irony and cunning are recurring staples, part of a complex web of dreams and historical allusions leading readers to marvel at the conflicting and imaginative understandings the seemingly impenetrable fictions present.

Prising open for readers an unfamiliar experiential realm, a space containing Jewish worlds of a puzzling nature, Agnon’s canvas possesses a deceptive surface clarity, its effect so dazzling that the reader is left speculating what is real and what is fantasy. With few exceptions, Agnon’s creations shimmer with a dream-like ambience that is transcribed with a matter-of-fact tonality and an intricate childlike innocence yoked with sophisticated mystical religious yearnings. Interspersed throughout his prose are themes of loss, return to one’s home, dislocation and longing, underscored by whimsical humour, sardonic detachment and astuteness.

¹² Sharon Green. *Not a Simple Story: Love and Politics in a Modern Hebrew Novel*. Latham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002: 53.

¹³ Green, *Not a Simple Story: Love and Politics in a Modern Hebrew Novel*, 53.

Cognisant of Freud's discoveries about the propensity of dreams to signify two contrary ideas at the same time, Agnon infused his sequences with a multitude of dreams that explicate the preoccupations of his principals and the meanings of their deportment. In the manner of the rabbinical method which he internalized, Agnon recurrently used repetitions and doublings to stress the tension between the explicit and the implicit so as to deftly prove that what is marginal, what is seen as a throwaway detail, may be central to the narrative context. As a result, conventional forms, style and themes were undercut and defied, even if it appeared that they were, in fact, being affirmed.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon (known more widely by the pseudonym Shai Agnon) was born Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes in the Jewish town of Buczacz in eastern Galicia (currently Belarus), then part of Austro-Hungary, on July 26, 1888. Interestingly, in his Nobel acceptance speech, he noted that he regarded himself as "one who was born in Jerusalem."¹⁴ Born to a middle-class family of rabbis and scholars, Agnon's father, Shalom Mordechai Halevi, a qualified rabbi, worked as a fur merchant and was a fervent and educated disciple of the Hasidic Rebbe of Chortov. His presence was deeply influential on the young boy. "All I know," Agnon maintained, "I learned from my father."¹⁵ In fact, in his address at the state banquet delivered in honour of the Nobel laureates, he revealed that he composed his first poem aged five out of a longing for his father, who was often away. His father, together with a local rabbi, taught the boy the Talmud, as well as the teachings of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides. From his mother, Esther, whose family belonged to the stream of *Mitnagdim* (a Jewish movement whose

¹⁴ Richard Oestermann. *Born Again*. Gefen: Jerusalem, New York, 1999: 40.

¹⁵ S.Y. Agnon. *Haromanim shel Shay Agnon*. Tel Aviv: The Open University: 1988: 205.

strict rationalism stood in sharp contrast to the emotive mysticism of the Hassidim), he acquired a knowledge of German literature. Agnon's drama is a blend of these divergent vistas.

While the *shtetl* was the universe of his childhood, where he was immersed in religious education, his work was shaped by the clashing forces of a transitional world. Unlike his contemporaries, he eschewed prophetic subtexts, never haranguing his readers. Instead, he deployed artful, universal messages about restless characters, wrenched from their environment and struggling with the pull of tradition and the appeal of the modern ethos. The period of Agnon's youth was a time of turmoil when the pogroms in Russia following the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 wreaked havoc on the Jews. Consequently, a considerable flow of Jews poured out westward to Europe, with a smaller stream choosing Palestine as their destination.

He decided to become a writer when he was eight and published his first poem in Yiddish when he was fifteen. In the following three years (1903–06), he produced about seventy literary works in Hebrew and Yiddish that were published in Galicia. (In 1977, the Hebrew University published the collection of stories and poems he composed in Yiddish during those years.) In 1907, aged nineteen, he left the *shtetl* and came to Palestine as part of the great wave of emigration (known as the Second Aliyah) and settled in Jaffa and Jerusalem. There, the budding writer served as the first secretary of the Jewish court in Jaffa. It was in Palestine that Agnon was confronted with the contradictory confluence of Judaic tradition, the western, cosmopolitan culture of the 20th century, and modern Hebrew literature.

Temporarily jettisoning his religious habits during his first stay in Palestine, he published his first story, “*Agunot*” (Forsaken Wives), in 1908 in the journal *Ha-Omer*, which not only enhanced his nascent reputation but also gave him his pseudonym, which he adopted

as his official family name in 1924. Concerning star-crossed couples in Jerusalem, it encased within its midst the style of writing seen in the later Agnon. It has been suggested that the nom de plume ‘Agnon’ is a literary construction aimed at braiding the author’s destiny to that of the Jewish people. Agnon is taken from *agunot*, a term applied to women who have been abandoned by their husbands and are left in a state of limbo or shackled since they cannot remarry.

Agnon perceived himself as trapped in an analogous situation – caught between different universes but belonging to neither, a fractured position dramatized in his corpus. Baruch Hochman asserts that it is no accident that Agnon appropriated that name for:

The very word is redolent of loss but also of the infinite yearning and ineffable tenderness elicited by loss. All of Agnon’s work was to pivot on such feelings. First, there was the sort of loss rendered in this tale: of loved ones torn away in the midst of life, by chance, by fate, by death or desire. Then there was historical loss: the submergence of the world of origins to which one’s feelings are bound in the abyss of history. Finally, there was metaphysical loss: of transcendental objects of desire in the bewilderment of modernity.¹⁶

Ruth Wisse proffers another reading: “The adoption of the Hebrew name suggests that the writer will always remain within the bounds of tradition but without full security, like that afforded a wedded spouse”.¹⁷

Agnon repeatedly tied parts of his autobiography to the annals of Jewish history. For example, he asserted that he was born on the Ninth of Av, the momentous date that marks the

¹⁶ Baruch Hochman. *Fiction of Shmuel Yosef Agnon*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970.

¹⁷ Ruth Wisse. *The Modern Jewish Canon.: A Journey Through Language and Culture*. New York: Free Press, 2000: 180-181

destruction of the two Jewish temples and the supposed time when the future messiah will be born. Additionally, he connected the two occasions his house was destroyed by fire to the obliteration of the two temples. Similarly, in his fiction, one can discern semi-autobiographical aspects. Buczacz, his childhood town, serves as the backdrop in several stories, appearing under the fictionalized name of Szybuzs, which translates as ‘error’ in Hebrew. Szybuzs functions as the all-purpose metaphor for the fading mythical space the *shtetl* once occupied in the diaspora.

In 1912, he published his first novella, *Ve-Hayah he-'Akov le-Mishor (And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight)*, with the support of his friend, the writer Haim Brenner. Noticed by several literary specialists, the aspiring and extraordinary learned writer was urged by Arthur Rupin, a major figure in the Zionist movement, to broaden his horizons in Berlin. In 1913, he travelled to Germany, where for the next eleven years, he gained a reputation as a fine litterateur, due mainly to his mastery of the German language and his impressive fiction. During his sojourn in Berlin, he served as a research assistant to academics, gave Hebrew lessons and worked for a publisher of Jewish-themed books, all the while attending lectures on philosophy and the social sciences.

During these restless years, living also in Munich, Leipzig and Wiesbaden, he helped found the journal *Der Jude* (The Jew) and edited the *Juedischer Verlag*. Embraced by the Jewish intelligentsia in 1913, while in Berlin, Agnon met Shlomo Zalman Schocken, a self-made businessman and philanthropist who became an admirer of the young man and consequently financed the publication of his books. Schocken’s extraordinary support (in the form of a writing stipend) permitted Agnon to live free from financial worries and to comfortably concentrate on writing. Schocken Publishing relocated to Tel Aviv in the 1930s after the Nazis closed it down and later opened an office in New York. It’s noteworthy that

Schocken Publishing still brings out Agnon's work today. It was Schocken, together with the editor of Israel's daily *Haaretz* (owned by the Schocken family), who organized the lobby that eventually led to the awarding of the Nobel Prize.

In 1920, Agnon met and married Esther Marx, the feisty daughter of a well-to-do orthodox family that initially opposed the union, believing she was marrying a man below her status. The couple, who had been married for fifty years, had a son and a daughter, both born in Germany.

Although he began writing in Yiddish as a child, he chose to write in Hebrew, the ancient holy tongue that had been moribund for hundreds of years until revived and turned into a re-emerging language by Eliezer Ben Yehuda at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Mark Schechner observes that writing in Hebrew in 1908 was "to draw one's language and frame of reference from the traditional liturgy and to envision a future based on sacred time and space in which Judaism would not be simply preserved but renewed and transformed."¹⁸ Unlike other pioneers of secular fiction, such as I.L. Peretz, I.B. Singer, Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Babel, who turned to Yiddish, Russian and German, Agnon elected Hebrew because he wanted to write for a future nation that would be located in *Eretz Israel* (The Land of Israel), rather than in Europe or the United States. Championing and selecting Hebrew as the modern language of his writing corresponded to the philosophical tenets of Zionism and the enlightenment, two movements that promoted Hebrew as the language of emancipation and argued for western modernization as the road to rebuilding the Jewish nation.

¹⁸ Mark Shechner, "A Storyteller For The Whole World: Collection Shines New Light On Israeli Writer S.Y. Agnon," *Buffalo News*. August 6, 1995: 8G.

Already at seventeen, Agnon was an ardent Zionist, yelling, “it can’t be!” at the hearing of Theodor Herzl’s death.

Ideological motivations notwithstanding, it seems that it was pure devotion to Hebrew that drove Agnon to compose in Hebrew: “Out of affection for our language and love of the holy, I burn the midnight oil over the teachings of the Torah and deny myself food for the words of our sages that I may store them up within me to be ready upon my lips.”¹⁹ The writer’s fondness for Hebrew led Robert Alter to claim that for Agnon, the Hebrew characters constituted “the alphabet of holiness”.²⁰ Golomb Hoffman opines that “Because Agnon writes in Hebrew, the very language that he uses maintains a connection to the language of scripture and commentary; that relationship is made inescapable by the many ways in which the writer uses Jewish themes and sources.”²¹

Submerged in Biblical and Talmudic teachings, Agnon studied his corpus with pious folktales, Hassidic-like parables, gothic romances and stream-of-consciousness plots, reminiscent of European literature in the manner of Borges, Calvino and Bruno Schultz, that underscore the sufferings and history of the Jewish people. Agnon’s whole output is crossed with references to Scandinavian, Russian and French literature, pointing to the fact that he read far and wide and was highly conversant with European novelists such as Flaubert (whose virtues he exalted in correspondences), Cervantes and Stefan Zweig. Yet, Agnon insisted that he was influenced primarily by “The Bible, Mishna, Talmud, Midrash and Rashi’s commentary

¹⁹ Quoted in Robert Alter. “The Genius of S.Y. Agnon.” *Commentary*, August 1, 1961: 107.

²⁰ Robert Alter. “S.Y. Agnon: The Alphabet of Holiness: in *After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing*. New York, E.P. Dutton: 1969: 131-150.

²¹ Anne Golomb Hoffman. *Between Exile and Return S.Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991: 1.

on the Bible”,²² the next influences being “the medieval Halachic commentators, Hebrew poets and philosophers led by Maimonides.”²³ Certainly, Agnon drew much inspiration from Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, a master storyteller who paved the way for Agnon to write, in a secular world, rabbinically-themed tales where every action carries symbolic overtones. Agnon edited several wide-ranging anthologies of rabbinical texts, such as *Yamim Noraim* (*Days of Awe*, 1938), assembling a cluster of folktales inspired by the Jewish festivals; *Atem Reitem* (*Ye Have Seen*, 1959), bringing together material extending from the Bible to the Hassidic scribes of the 19th century, and *Sifreihem Shel Tzadikim* (*Books of the Righteous*, 1960–61), a volume of Hassidic lore.

Straddling the worlds of the sacred and the modern as an orthodox Jew, religion often functions in his writing as the only bulwark against the moral disorder of contemporary society. Gershon Shaked, who labels Agnon, a revolutionary traditionalist, maintains that the revolutionary aspect can be attributed to the tendency in Agnon to show that the new social order sweeping through Europe was, in truth, a type of anarchy that disoriented the Jews. Writing in 1956, I.M. Lask explains:

Agnon’s stories of life a hundred years ago and more are shrouded in a mellow nostalgia, a family chronicle warmth similar to that of a grandmother telling the tales of her clan. The closer he comes to the contemporary scene, however, the less pleased with his subject-matter he appears to be. His tales of life fifty years ago are marked by an almost photographic realism, while when he comes to the present day, a certain undercurrent of asperity can be detected in the apparent serenity that characterizes all he writes.²⁴

²² Shmuel Yosef Agnon. “Influences in my Writing,” *Ariel* 17 (1966-1967): 6.

²³ Agnon. “Influences in my Writing”, 6.

²⁴ I.M. Lask in Shmuel Yosef Agnon. *Tehilla, and other Israeli tales*. Translated by

Agnon did not refrain from criticizing unchecked single-mindedness to one's faith. One such example is "*Agadat Hasofer*" ("The Tale of the Scribe", 1923). It concerns a pious Jewish scribe who devotes all his energy to his craft and thus neglects his suffering wife, who remains childless. The story ends with the righteous man's death, following that of his wife, though he manages to complete a Torah scroll in her memory. Alongside Agnon's total identification with the Yeshiva world, one can also detect a certain ambivalence that doggedly avoids superfluous sentimentality. One invariable element that animates and informs the Agnon imagination is that an over-reliance on modern attitudes, on the one hand, and an exclusive belief in the moral certainty brought forth by tradition, on the other, can imprison as much as it can liberate.

Aloof and reserved, he rarely sought the limelight and refrained from articulating his social and political views. He was intensely serious about his religion and would vigorously defend the orthodox world against what he viewed as unfair attacks. Shortly before travelling to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize, he consulted rabbis as to whether it was appropriate for him to leave Israel for the occasion. Concurrently, he retained close ties to the less observant literary and scholarly communities. Yet, he did not shy away from disapproving of the religious community, especially when religious parties entered the political fray. He once noted that he sees things as they are. And indeed, he was disappointed that the Jewish experience was diluted and condensed to a simple political credo. Thus, his nationalist belief in the Greater Land of Israel stemmed from his religious philosophy and thinking rather than any political outlook.

I.M. Lask and others and others.) London, Abelard-Schuman:1956: 10.

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Agnon belonged to the Land of Israel movement, founded in 1967, which believed that the whole of the land of Israel included Western Palestine.

Israel's pre-eminent author, Amos Oz, who held the Agnon chair at Ben Gurion University in southern Israel, and who has written *Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God*,²⁵ a series of critical essays on several of Agnon's short stories and novels, believes that every Israeli author has had a connection with Agnon, who set the bar so high that most only aspire to reach his marvellous heights. Lauded as Agnon's greatest living heir, Oz acknowledges the master as one of his literary mentors, as do famed Israeli authors and poets A.B. Yehoshua, Aharon Appelfeld and the late Yehuda Amichai. This admiration is further proof that Agnon is still today a father figure to scores of Israeli authors, exerting an irresistible influence on his successors.

Agnon's strength lies chiefly in short fiction, a form that encases the Midrashic sketch and the Hassidic yarns. His lengthier opuses resemble his short fiction, the novels structured as vignettes braided together thematically. *Sefer Hamaasim (The Book of Deeds, 1951)* is a multi-stranded collection of twenty-one stories characterized by expressionism, surrealism and stream-of-consciousness, which tell of the anguished suffering of the Jews in Europe. The intensity of the plots led the critic Nahum Glatzer to observe that Agnon "must have felt compelled to abandon the form of the well-composed tale for the experience of chaos."²⁶ Agnon's stories chronicle and reflect an inward and reclusive mood, at times melancholic, embodied by the galaxy of forlorn intellectuals, neurotic husbands, and remorseful scholars

²⁵ Amos Oz. *Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

²⁶ Shmuel Yosef Agnon. *Twenty-One Stories*, edited by Nahum Norbert Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1970; London: Gollancz, 1970): 5.

and philosophers. These characters are rendered powerless by personal angst and sexual immobility.

The affinity with Kafka is unmistakable. Although he denied any suggestion that he was influenced by contemporary writers (insisting he had never read Kafka, even though Kafka's collected writings sat on a bookshelf in his study), Kafka's signature elements of irony, dream-like sequences and scepticism fused with Agnon's religious doubt are much to the fore. A portion of the author's Nobel acceptance speech conveys the image of a solitary artist, aloof and ignorant of present-day modes: "Some see in my books the influences of authors whose names, in my ignorance, I have not even heard, while others see the influence of poets whose names I have heard but whose writing I have never read."²⁷

Also evident in the Agnon universe is Jerusalem. In many ways, Jerusalem serves as the central axis of Agnon's life and canvas. It is said that when he arrived in Jerusalem in 1924, after spending twelve years in Europe, he rented a room and immediately headed for the Western Wall. Arriving at dusk, he covered his face and wept. In one passage, he writes that Jerusalem's gaze is fixed upon all of the people of Israel. David Patterson believes that amidst Agnon's anguished sense of exile and rupture from tradition, Jerusalem personified the one stable positive element, stating that in Agnon's tales, the city is "endowed with a personality of her own, and becomes a symbol for all that is meaningful and permanent and harmonious in life. It is as though the holy city alone contains the seeds which might restore that wholeness

²⁷ "Banquet Speech: Samuel Agnon's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1966. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/agnon-speech.html

of spirit and oneness that are slipping through the nerveless fingers of our unhappy generations.²⁸

Seminal critics such as Baruch Kurzweil and Dov Sadan, who did much to enhance Agnon's reputation, determined early on that Jerusalem was the soul and purpose in the Agnon oeuvre and that it epitomized an absolute value within his world. Actually, a systematic check of his works reveals that the name Jerusalem is mentioned 2600 times.

Over and over, Agnon declaimed his abiding love for Jerusalem, once in a youthful poem and later in *Oreah Nata Lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*, 1939): "My life and soul I shall give for you the holy city/ Asleep and awake, you shall have my entire happiness."²⁹ Tales such as "Tehila"(1952), "Eido ve Einam" ("Eido and Einam", 1952), "*Bilvav Yamim*" ("In the Seas of Youth, 1934), and some of the novels are set in the old city and depict Jerusalem in a loving, reverential fashion.

In "Tehila", for instance, Agnon draws a direct parallel between the 104-year-old eponymous heroine, whose name radiates admiration (since it is rooted in biblical origins and means "praise") and the city. Like Jerusalem, Tehila is blessed with long life and embodies the supreme ideals of piety, holiness and pride, usually associated with Israel's eternal capital. The opening paragraph, although referring to Tehila, can just as well be a paean to Jerusalem:

Now there used to be in Jerusalem a certain old woman, as comely an old woman as you have seen in your eyes. Righteous she was, and wise she was, and gracious and humble; for kindness and pity were the light of her eyes, and every wrinkle in her face told of

²⁸ David Patterson and Glenda Abramson. (editors). *Studies in the fiction of S.J. Agnon*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994): 6.

²⁹ Shmuel Werses *S.Y. Agnon ki-feshuto: Kerieh bi-khetavav* (Jerusalem, Mossad Bialik: 2000): 291

blessing and peace. I know that women should not be likened to angels: yet I would liken her to an angel of God. She had in her, besides, the vigour of youth; so that she wore old age like a mantle, while in herself there was seen no trace of her years.³⁰

Agnon lived in the southern neighbourhood of Talpiaz in Jerusalem for forty years, working from a small library cum office that is now a museum, visited by countless tourists and host to monthly lectures on his canon. He followed a strict and spartan routine, rising early to say his morning prayers and then ascending the stairs to the tiny private area, where he toiled until noon. He would sometimes work all day and into the night. Near a stove, he stood at a polished wood podium, writing by hand. He stood to write in order, as he put it, “to grab the exact word I want from all those flying around the room.”³¹ It was only when he became diagnosed with a heart condition that he sat to work.

For the serious and seasoned artist, writing was a craft of precision. Aharon Megged, a renowned Israeli writer, says that Agnon would get angry when someone criticized him. Seldom satisfied with his jewel-like handiwork, he laboured for months, even years, amending and substituting words and phrases in numerous versions, delivering the full flavour of his linguistic richness and his own inimitable archaic Hebrew (sometimes tagged as ‘Agnonit’ for its distinctiveness). Accordingly, there are in existence numerous manuscripts and widely disparate versions of his collected works, one in eleven volumes and another in eight. When in the summer of 1916, he was summoned for a medical check-up in anticipation of conscription into the Austrian army, Agnon was horrified by the possibility of military service. Shuddering

³⁰ S.Y. Agnon, “Tehila” Translated by Walter Lever. *Ariel: A Quarterly Review of the Arts And Sciences in Israel*, 19 (Winter 1966/67): 75.

³¹ Banquet Speech: Samuel Agnon's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1966.

that the proofreaders assigned to his upcoming book would negligently allow a mistake to sneak in, he ingested a massive number of pills and chain-smoked to avoid the draft. Dismissed by the medical board, he nevertheless was required to lie in hospital for several months.

When the master artist worked, no one was allowed into the study, and his wife, Esther, had to ensure that there was absolute quiet. The street in which he lived was blocked off to traffic by the city council, while a sign hanging at the head of the street proclaimed to all passers-by: “No cars are to enter. Agnon is writing.”³² In 1983, Agnon’s daughter, Emuna Yaron, gathered and edited letters that Agnon and his wife had exchanged. The book, *Darling Estherlein*,³³ is a cornucopia of intimate details, shining a new light on the political situation in Jerusalem, Agnon’s longing for his wife, and his affection for his two children. The letters are written in the same lyrical, magnificent prose one finds in Agnon’s stories. In this connection, since the 1970s, his daughter has been collecting and publishing his voluminous writings, something her prolific father was reluctant to do while alive. As a result, there are now more gems in print posthumously than in the author’s lifetime.

A true lover of old books, he routinely patronized second-hand bookshops, purchasing rare editions (sometimes dating back to the 17th century) with money he steadily set aside. During his spell in Germany, he acquired old Jewish books for the private library of his patron, Zalman Schocken. One can note that books and their traumatic loss figure prominently in the writer’s life. In the summer of 1924, while living in Bad Homburg, Germany, flames consumed his large private library, including valuable manuscripts and *Be’tzror Ha’hayim (In the Bond of Life)*, a nearly completed autobiographical novel whose publication was imminent. Also

³² Shmuel Yosef Agnon. *A book that was lost and other stories*. edited with introductions by Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman. (New York: Schocken, 1995): 29.

³³ Shmuel Yosef Agnon. *Esterlein Yekirati: Michtavim (1924-1931)*. Jerusalem: Schocken, 2000.

destroyed was a compilation of Hassidic legends that he assembled with his friend Martin Buber. To the present day, the causes of the mysterious fire have not been explained (the 50-shekel note that bears his portrait contains on the other side a précis of that event). Agnon, who was in the hospital at the time, lost 4000 Hebrew books. Devastated, this disaster had a lasting impact on Agnon, who saw the fire as an omen. In the wake of this misfortune, he became convinced that his stopover in exile was too long and returned to Palestine in 1924, where, as he revealed in his Nobel Prize address, he had written “all that God has put into my heart and my pen.”³⁴

Incredibly, tragedy struck a second time. During the bloody riots of 1929, his rented home in Jerusalem was invaded and looted. Although he had managed to save most of his cherished books and writings, once again, thousands of volumes were ruined and damaged. Not surprisingly, Agnon foregrounded this latest calamity in one of his tales, the 1941 “*Me-Oyev le-Ohev*” (“From Foe to Friend”), a multifaceted, allegorical narrative about a mighty battle waged by a persistent wind (an all-purpose metaphor for the Arabs) and a determined settler who wishes to settle in the suburb of Talpiot. Shattered, Agnon asked his friend, architect Fritz Kornberg, to design a new dwelling for him and his family, which was completed in 1931. On the wall of Agnon’s house remains an inscription which encapsulates his intense feelings about his home: “I have built myself a house and planted myself a garden”.³⁵ It is worth highlighting here that the feeling of homelessness, of losing one’s dwelling, or of simply not

³⁴ Banquet Speech: Samuel Agnon's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1966.

³⁵ Jacob Solomon. “Beyond Masada From the Desk (And the Rest of the House) of S.Y. Agnon,” *Haaretz*, April 18, 2013: N.P.

having a house where one can lodge, is a strong current in the Agnon landscape, serving as a metaphor for the precarious situation of the Jew.

The wandering, homeless Jew and his relationship with the world are at the heart of Agnon's first novel, *Hakhnasat Kalah (The Bridal Canopy, 1919)*, a fascinating folk epic, rich in scale and ambitious in its thematic perspective. Formally, *The Bridal Canopy* resembles a patchwork of stories within stories, separate pieces stitched together around the main narrative, bound by such themes as marriage, charity, generosity, the role of providence and rootlessness. Not infrequently equated with Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, it is concerned with the travels of the Hassidic Reb Yudel and his companion Notte through the towns and villages of 19th-century Galicia, hoping to find a dowry for his daughters. Welding fantasy and realism, the adventures of the two peripatetic principals and the constellation of characters they encounter, each with a vivid story to tell, allow Agnon to touchingly paint a mosaic of Jewish and gentile life, replete with folk-like vignettes, tragic tales and homiletical wisdom. Looming large throughout is the emphasis placed on the unwavering faith in the creator as literalized by Reb Yudel's piety and love for his fellow man.

In a wider context, the novel is a meditation on the decline of religious life in Poland, utilizing a religious protagonist whose worldview is obtrusively at odds with his secular surrounding but who, throughout, maintains his simple faith in God. To this end, Yudel's fidelity is rewarded when, upon his return, he finds a buried treasure, giving him the wealth to marry his daughters. In Baruch Hochman's words, an element in the novel is "the search for a past, probing into a once-upon-a-time way of life. In *Hakhansat kala (The Bridal Canopy, 1931)*, Agnon is the literary archivist of Galician Jewry, the comprehensive preserver of a now

destroyed civilization.”³⁶ Critics, dazed by the mighty stream of digressions and Jewish lore that clog the main plot, have now realized that Agnon, who first included *The Bridal Canopy* in his collected works, intended this project to serve as a thematic and aesthetic index for his later creations. In this novel, Agnon sought to show (early in his career) that his future landmark projects would be fundamentally different from what his literary forbears had done in both Hebrew and European letters.

Sippur Pashut (A Simple Story), Agnon’s 1935 novel (an ironic choice of the title since it is all but simple), is a beautifully drawn social treatise that dramatizes the conflict of Jewish middle-class mores with European modernist ideas of religious-sexual freedom, as well as a rebellion against indurate boundaries of behaviour. At the same time, it is a perceptive social allegory melded with a character study of the dilemmas entailed in human existence and the sacrifices man must make to fit into a rigidly defined world. David Ghitelman writes that “*A Simple Story* is, in the order of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* or Andre Gide’s *The Immoralist*, a complex and resonant meditation on the comforts of civilization versus its inevitable discontents.”³⁷

Set in the first decade of the 20th century, in an Eastern European backwater (the town of Szybuzs), *A Simple story* follows the life of Hirshl Horowitz, the only son of wealthy shopkeepers who falls in love with Blume Nacht, his poor second cousin who is sent to live with his parents and work as a housekeeper following the death of her mother. Hirshl, a classic schlemiel who relishes the warmth of his middle-class family, is forced by his dominant and overbearing mother, Tzirel, to repress his yearnings for Blume and marry the pre-matched and

³⁶ Baruch Hochman. *Fiction of Shmuel Yosef Agnon*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970.

³⁷ David Ghitelman, “A Schlemiel Falls in Love,” *Newsday*, (2 February 1986):17.

shallow Mina Ziemlich (daughter of a wealthy landowner). We see, however, that Hirshl's blistering affection for the woman who captured his heart has not been quelled but has rather increased, resulting in restlessness and insomnia (he undertakes nocturnal walks, hoping to glimpse a sight of Blume, only to see her vision at a lighted window), and eventually mental disintegration. The breakdown scenes are revelatory of an inner journey into the netherland of the psyche, coupled with chilling historical flashbacks to Jewish milestones of exile and destruction. Woven into the architecturally precise tale is a multi-hued portrait of the Jewish community in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the dawn of the 20th century, depicting the respite and success the Jews of Galicia benefited from under the tough Czarist rule.

Aware of their son's tragic pining, Hirshl's manipulative parents send him to a sanatorium in a distant city, relieved to learn that the townsfolk believe that this is a clever scam to help Hirshl avoid the draft. There, the frustrated young man is treated by a Dr, Langsham, whose unconventional methods involve Freudian regressive therapy that takes the patient back to his childhood. Singing his patient nostalgic lullabies that he remembers from the small Jewish village he grew up in and later abandoned, the eccentric psychiatrist shows Hirshl that the only cure for the soul is a return to one's simple roots of Jewish spiritualism and living. As the novel draws to a close, Hirshl reconciles with his wife, rejoicing in parenthood and finding emotional and sexual contentment, seemingly embodying Agnon's affirmation of marriage as the bedrock of society.

What is the unsuspecting reader to make of Hirshl's final acceptance of the conformity of bourgeois existence? Is Agnon mocking a weak-willed character who, after being tempted by the chaos of thwarted, forbidden love, does not think for himself? Hillel Halkin, who first translated the book into English, deems *A Simple Story* as an anti-modernist tract, arguing that

the novel's conclusion ventures beyond the typical modernist aversion to bourgeois mores by suggesting that sexual desire is a destructive force and that it is middle-class values that provide vitally needed constancy.³⁸ By contrast, another commentator has contended that there is "more irresolution in the novel ... that to the end Agnon makes us painfully aware of the terrible price Hirshl pays for his final normality."³⁹

Agnon was at full flight in *Oreah Nata Lalun (A Guest for the Night, 1939)*, an unsettling, nightmarish account of the spiritual and material decline of European Jewry post World War I, as related by an unnamed narrator returning to his native town of Szybuzs. The apocalyptic novel, first serialized in the newspaper *Haaretz*, was inspired by Agnon's visit to Buczacz in 1930 after a sixteen-year absence. The visit provoked a Proust-like flood of childhood memories that constitutes one of the work's pillars and also explains the concatenation of the past and the present. We learn that the hero of another novel, *Only Yesterday*, is the great-grandson of Reb Yudel, the main character of Agnon's 1935 novel *The Bridal Canopy*.

Upon his arrival at his hometown, the hero discovers a community in decline, devoid of faith and ravaged by the war – the antithesis to the congregation of yore. It is instructive to note that as a teenager, Agnon occasionally called his hometown "a city of the dead", and in *A Guest for the Night*, this sentiment overhangs every scene and action. Agnon tips his metaphorical hat when he has his protagonist, on arrival, meet a crippled watchman and later a Jew-hating beggar, signifying the degradation of the place. And indeed, acute religious emptiness permeates diaspora life: the synagogues are almost barren, and those attending

³⁸ Robert Alter. "Blind Beggars And Incestuous Passions," *The New York Times*, (22 December, 1985): N.P.

³⁹ Alter. "Blind Beggars And Incestuous Passions".

services do so out of routine, even presenting the guest with the key for the *Beth Midrash* (Jewish study hall) for which they have no further use. Starkly painful in tone and atmosphere, the tale records the despair Agnon felt and portends the desolation of Jewish life that was to follow. Nonetheless, the book's resolution is laced with optimism – prior to leaving, the narrator presents a newborn baby at a circumcision ceremony with a substitute key for the *Beth Midrash*. This hopeful message for the future is given added resonance in an essential scene that sees the hero, now back in Palestine, finding the original key he thought he had lost. Asserting that *A Guest for the Night* is Agnon's most important opus, Judith Romney Wegner writes that the novel constitutes a historical document of protest:

It is the author's testament to the inability of European Jewry to find an adequate replacement for the traditional culture that for centuries had sustained Jewish self-identification and *raison d'être* in an alien world. Agnon bears witness to the disappointment of the *maskilim* (enlightened ones) who had hoped to forge a modern Jewish identity compatible with the Age of Reason, as well as to his own profound disillusionment with the failure of the *Haskalah* (enlightenment).⁴⁰

Arguably Agnon's capstone, *Temol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*, 1945), was the first novel to be located in Palestine, and although set during the Second Aliyah, it was, in fact, written in the shadow of the Holocaust – as evidenced by the interconnected motifs of death and rebirth it tackles. Robert Alter explains that Agnon dealt with the grim reality of the Shoah indirectly because of his fabulist proclivities:

⁴⁰ Judith Romney Wegner, "*A Guest for the Night: Epitaph on the Perished Hopes of the Haskalah*" in *Studies in the Fiction of S.J. Agnon*, edited by David Patterson and Glenda Abramson (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994): 107-127.

... he preferred to approach the menace of recent history obliquely, often displacing the raw terror of contemporary experience into various kinds of symbolic images and parabolic intimations that could be held at an intellectual distance ... the utter bleakness ... of this novel's vision of man and God may be, after all, a direct response to the nightmare of Hitler years.⁴¹

Only Yesterday begins with a wish fulfilment journey, proceeds with a series of picaresque adventures, dwells on love and loss, and ends on a tragic note. The book's buried themes are about how people often fail to actualize their dreams and how bewildered they feel when they stumble against tragedy. Like many of Agnon's stories, it deals with the twisted threads of life that expose fairytales as mere fictions and show existence to be a whirlpool of dark, unfulfilled desires. And it is about how the romantic image of places and ideologies rarely resembles their true state.

A reconstruction of early pioneer society, the novel is an insightful and sour critique of the Zionist endeavour that also examines the elegiac and dark undertows of human existence following the national and personal exile of the Jewish nation. Cosmic images and apocalyptic messages abound as the novel seeks to reference and encompass the universal destiny and suffering of all people. The novel was recognized as such a monumental achievement in world literature that in the 1950s, the critic Edmund Wilson, who compared Agnon to Kafka and Chagall, publicly called for the author to be given the Nobel Prize, noting that "Agnon is a classic ... one is ready to accept him as a true representative of that great line of Jewish writers

⁴¹ Robert Alter. *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish writers and modern historical crisis*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977: 170.

that begins with the authors of Genesis.”⁴² The metaphysically loaded novel is a companion piece to Agnon’s earlier tour de force, *A Guest for the Night*.

Only Yesterday is the story of Yitzhak Kumer, a naive pioneer who travels from Galicia to Turkish-controlled Palestine, along with the massive wave of immigrants, leaving the moribund world of the *shtetl* between the first decade of the 20th century and the outbreak of the World War II to rebuild, through backbreaking work, the Holy Land. In the main, the pioneers were secular idealists, intent on upholding the values of Jewish labour and resurrecting the Hebrew language. The dreamy-eyed young man, who abandons his Hassidic family in Buczacz, Galicia, for Zion, is impelled by the pioneer rhetoric and craves to plough the soil of the promised land, make the desert bloom, and be revived by the place. An iconic emblem of the Zionist pioneers who strained to become the new Jews and build a new national Jewish home, he is also the quintessential schlemiel, denuded of self-reflection or will, hopelessly romantic, and devoted to the doctrine that all of his fellow immigrants are brothers linked by a shared cause.

Before long, the brutal economics of the times are exposed when the naive hero, like his brethren, discovers that the Jewish farmers of the colonies prefer the docile Arab labourers, as they are cheaper and familiar with working the land. It soon becomes apparent that the reality is far removed from the Zionist ideal as settlers struggle to adapt to the cultural and social realities of the harsh environment.

In response, Kumer settles in the bustling, secular Jaffa, where he becomes a peripatetic sign painter (painting is a metaphor in the book for the covering up of reality) while at the same

⁴² Lewis. M, Dabney. (editor). *Edmund Wilson: Centennial Reflections*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997: 77.

time casting off the fettering shackles of his religious upbringing. Despite becoming a capable housepainter, Kumer lives with a recurring sense of failure for not cultivating the land. In addition to criticizing Israel's *Halutzim* society, Agnon's message could be that Zionism was an unfulfilling substitute for the many immigrants dreaming of a country flowing with milk and honey. Instead of finding their paradise in the Holy Land, they felt trapped in an inhospitable land. Central to the book is the fierce variance of the promised dream with the brutal realities of the Zionist enterprise.

Kumer, now living in Jaffa, is agonized by the titanic choice between the secular and traditional world. With remarkable care for detail, Agnon paints Jaffa as a sensual, lively centre brimful with young lovers, would-be revolutionaries, writers, crooked politicians and charlatans. The descriptions are redolent with touches of authenticity that constantly ring true. This is not only because of Agnon's mastery of construction but also because the author himself travelled from Buczacz to Palestine, settling in Jaffa in 1908.

Over the course of his sojourn in Jaffa, the virginal Kumer meets and falls in love with Sonya Zweering, the seductive, dangerously sexual woman who frequently dapples Agnon's corpus. For her part, Sonya treats the affair as a causal fling, whereas Kumer is so infatuated with the alluring female that he flagellates himself for not having done the honourable thing and married her. Crushed after Sonya capriciously ends their short-lived romance, Kumer moves to Jerusalem and into the arms of the virtuous Shifra, the only daughter of Reb Faish, a fanatic of the Me'ah She'arim neighbourhood who specializes in excommunications.

Jerusalem is the converse of Jaffa. It is a bastion of religious Jews and manipulative rabbis who are mostly anti-Zionists, enmeshed in *shtetl*-like surroundings. Amos Oz, in his collection of essays on Agnon, *The Silence of Heaven*, observes that Jerusalem is shown to be

fossilized and empty, a portrayal aflame with scathing barbs and irony.⁴³ Still, Kumer is inveigled by Jaffa's charm, to which he returns once more but ultimately chooses Jerusalem. The return to Jerusalem also signals a resumption of his religious observance and an abandonment of his Zionist ideals. And although he marries Shifra, Kumer struggles to reconcile the spiritual vacuity of the present with the nostalgic image of the past.

Much of the novel's drama comes from a subplot involving Balak, a dog on whose back Kumer, in an act of childish playfulness, paints the words 'Mad Dog'. The stray animal, until then a staid fixture on the streets of Mea Shearim, begins to suffer persecution by the inhabitants of the community, who heed the warning daubed on his fur. Pelted with stones, Balak is forced to flee his beloved neighbourhood, where he would scour for kosher meat left by the butchers, and now has to do with the disgraceful scraps of the gentiles.

The author endows his canine with the gift of speaking, which he uses to comment on the people he encounters and the enigma of mankind in a prose made up of different Hebrew architectonics. Balak, while wandering through the city's maze of Christian and Muslim quarters, needs to call on his wiliness to survive the panic-seized residents. Soon, he emerged as a celebrated point of discussion in the diaspora, a cause for newspaper articles and debates, and an object for various theories about his real import.

After a while, the 'exiled' animal, a poetic confection of remarkable momentum that leavens proceedings with surrealism, sets out to avenge its fate on the man who marked him and is responsible for all his anguish. In the end, the two heroes meet for the second and last time with tragic consequences. The mongrel deliciously bites Kumer, who dies a grotesque

⁴³ Amos Oz. *The silence of heaven: Agnon's fear of God*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000): 180.

death from rabies. Agnon underlines the biblical leitmotif of the Binding of Isaac near the book's coda, when the hero, like Isaac, bound with ropes, squirms in pain like a dog from the tortuous agony of his disease. Kumer's catastrophic and disproportionate punishment, coupled with God's silence in the face of such violence, served as Agnon's literary reaction to the German atrocities taking place. Nonetheless, the book's resolution is laced with optimism – in a crucial scene, set a day after Kumer's funeral, a life-giving rain comes down to rupture the excruciating drought that has enrobed the sun-baked land.

Agnon deploys the phantasmagorical creation of Balak to take the reader on a wild odyssey through the streets of Jerusalem, seen from ground zero level. Whenever the narrative focus switches to Balak, a properly constituted character, the plot assumes a Kafkaesque turn, intermingled with magic realism. This is no surprise. Agnon lived in Germany in the 1920s after turning his back on Jerusalem, where he was immersed in the modernist literature of Kafka and the writings of Freud.

There have been many interpretations as to what Balak stands for. On one level, he may be said to be Kumer's bestial alter ego, embodying the primal and repressed desires the hero does not dare articulate. On another level, he can be read as modern-day Job, suffering from inexplicable cosmic injustice and determined to decipher the mysteries of his bitter woes (at one point, he mutters, "where is heaven"). And still, on another, he may, as Amos Oz suggests, emblemize the motifs of desertion and displacement, as well as the eternal search for love and home we all yearn for.

While the narrative obviously leads in many different directions, one operating tenor is the parallel drawn between Balak and Kumer. Both pine for the past – Kumer for the home he was raised in, bursting with homely sweetness of tradition and daily observance, Balak for the

kosher food of Mea She'arim. Both feel despairingly lonely. Both search for meaning in their particular universe. And both have been deceived by the trickeries of life. After all, rather than building the land and being rebuilt by it, Kumer is destroyed in the end.

Shira (1971), Agnon's swan song, was unfinished at the time of his death in 1970 and was edited and published posthumously by his daughter according to her father's instructions. Agnon worked on *Shira* for twenty-five years and left a tangle of related materials. With no ending vouchsafed in the original, two chapters were subsequently added in 1974 and 1978 as the manuscript's designated conclusion. This intricately plotted, penetrating work operates on many levels in probing the grandest of themes: the nature of art, love and obsession, evil, death and beauty. Beverly Fields adds that Agnon undertakes some of the most perennial European motifs: "... among them Thomas Mann's concept of life as a disease of matter, with art as the ultimate disease, and the legends of Faust, Prometheus and the Wandering Jew."⁴⁴ Fields also points out that the main character's name – Manfred Herbst – calls to mind Byron's verse drama *Manfred*, conjuring up resonances of those legends.

Shira tells the story of Manfred Herbst, a German-born history professor immersed in German culture, who teaches at the Hebrew university of the 1930s. While in the hospital where his wife Sarah is giving birth to their third child, he meets Shira, a sickly, mannish and enigmatic nurse with whom he begins a brief affair, which later develops into a tormenting, erotic infatuation when she disappears.

The novel astonished many for its overt pattern of secularism, candid descriptions of sexual obsession and existential angst. There was wide-ranging amazement at the novel's lack

⁴⁴ Beverly Fields, "The Poetry of Truth in S.Y. Agnon's Final Novel, Tragedy Must Be Acted Out," *Chicago Tribune*, 31 December 1989: 4.

of admiration for the sacred world and surprise at a central character's scorn for tradition. Agnon populates the novel's pages with secular German immigrants whose cultural affiliations are to the German republic they escaped from rather than to the devout and pious Jews of Jerusalem, where they have made their home. There is a wealth of social detail conveyed through Agnon's collage of eccentric characters, including madmen, prophets and poets who roam the streets of the Rehavia and Talpiot neighbourhoods. In the background is a skein of historical references (the independence underground movements, Arab terrorism) that imbues the personal patchwork with a political strand. Palestine is under the rule of the British mandate, and the tumultuous conflict between Arab nationalism and Zionist nationalism is on display front and centre, particularly when Herbst is shot and his daughter Tamara joins one of the Jewish resistance movements.

Manfred's inability to finish a book is fused with his search for the repulsive Shira, whom he finally finds in a leper colony. The disquieting relationship offers Herbst no contentment. His morbid fantasies about Shira lead to a creative and emotional block that prevents him from completing his book. In a case of art imitating life, Herbst's passion for collecting and organizing books paralleled Agnon's own fixation. The ending is laden with parable: after being afflicted with the disease himself, Manfred decides to remain and care for Shira. Alan Mintz argues that the primary reason why the novel was not concluded is that, since the dialectic is between Shira as an unattainable protagonist and an allegorical container, "art, eros, purity, spirituality can simply not be accommodated by the worldly resources of the novel

as a genre.”⁴⁵ Mintz goes on to say that “For this reason, I believe the novel could not be finished.”⁴⁶

There are two alternative endings. In one, Herbst deduces Shira’s fate and admits his infidelity to his wife. In the other, he meets her, years later, afflicted with leprosy. Deeply symbolical, the macabre elements of the narrative swirl in and out of the pages. For instance, Herbst’s main area of study is Byzantine burial customs, while images of disease and death enfold Shira. One could argue that the answer to Shira’s identity lies in her name, in that Herbst’s fixation is with a pagan spirit of poetry. A repeated symbolic and visual trope in *Shira* is the central hero’s death wish and self-destructive sexual desire, fully articulated through an undercurrent of dreams that afflict the respected academician. The book’s dark strand concerns Herbst’s double existence, borne out of a lust for the sensual, beguiling nurse who shatters the married man’s sterile routine and domestic boredom. Driven to escape his austere life with the dull but devoted Henrietta, the hero is dominated by a libido that erotically enslaves him to the bold Shira. Above all, *Shira* is at once an exploration of modern man’s fascination with death and the crumbling moral structure of society. Both themes are ones that Agnon investigates with compassion and restraint, marshalling his customary novelistic devices of dreams and allusions while tempering his decorated irony.

Hand in hand with his major novels, Agnon published about six new short stories every year, which were featured in the Hebrew daily *Haaretz*. In 1931 the first volumes of *The Collected Works of S.Y. Agnon* were published, and in 1953, another anthology appeared in a

⁴⁵ Alan Mintz. *Translating Israel: Contemporary Hebrew Literature and Its Reception in America*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001: 106.

⁴⁶ Mintz. *Translating Israel: Contemporary Hebrew Literature and Its Reception in America*: 106.

seven-volume edition featuring novels, poems and short stories. Recently, Agnon's short fiction was gloriously showcased in a new translation of twenty-five of his stories into English, entitled *A Book That Was Lost and other Stories*.⁴⁷ The representative sampling of moral fables, autobiographical sketches and psychologically perspicuous delineations overwhelmingly spotlights Agnon's scope, ambition and keen ear and eye and sets forth the reason why he is appreciated and remembered for his smaller writings. What is evident in the collection is that the deceptively uncomplicated tales are cleverly subversive and derisive of Agnon's own cultural domain. Profound loss and the disruptive collapse of relationships touch many of the eclectic storylines. In "The Doctor's Divorce", a young physician is wracked with regret and suffering for the absurd jealousy that drove his wife away; in "The Kerchief", a narrator reminisces about the demise of his childhood naiveté, exploring memory through his mother's Sabbath kerchief; in "Two Pairs", a precious tefillin is destroyed in a fire. The palette also shows that a weighty strain, so significant in Agnon's total mural, is an enchantment with the village of his birth, which was annihilated by the Nazi beast. On a broad scale, the single, unified community of Buczacz was, for Agnon, an exquisite example of how all people could peacefully live together.

Another central aspect appearing in the volume is that the act of writing and reflection emerges as a recuperative, symbolic way to deal with the loss experienced by the characters. One striking occurrence of this theme is limned in the tale *A book that Was Lost and Other Stories*, in which the narrator stumbles upon an unpublished rabbinic commentary and attempts to send the manuscript from Buczacz to the national library in Jerusalem. The Yeshiva student

⁴⁷ Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman. (editors). *A book that was lost and other stories / by S.Y. Agnon*. New York: Schocken, 1995

saves enough pennies to post the book but later discovers that the manuscript, a touchstone for the intellectual traditions of the old world, never made it to the Holy Land. Yet, writing the story counteracts and compensates for the commentary that seems to be in continuous transit.

At the end of his life, Agnon was completely debilitated by a stroke and died of a fatal stroke in the town of Rehovot on February 17, 1970, at the age of eighty-two. He was buried on The Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

During the banquet held after the official Nobel Prize ceremony, Ingvar Andersson of the Swedish Academy made the following comments:

Mr Agnon – In your writing, we meet once again the ancient unity between literature and science, as antiquity knew it ... Your great chronicle of the Jewish people's spirit and life has, therefore, a manifold message. For the historian, it is a precious source, for the philosopher, an inspiration, for those who cannot live without literature, it is a mine of never failing riches. We honour in you a combination of tradition and prophecy, of saga and wisdom.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Horst Frenz. *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1999: 62

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