



Agnon's Modernity: Death and Modernism in S.Y. Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*

Uri Cohen

In 1966 S.Y. Agnon received half the Nobel Prize in literature "for his profoundly characteristic narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people."¹ Born in Buczacz, eastern Galicia, in 1888, Agnon came of age as a writer under the same influences and constraints experienced by other Jewish writers from the outskirts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.² Yet unlike the better-known examples of Franz Kafka or Bruno Schulz, Agnon came from a religious Jewish background and remained within the sphere of Jewish culture and politics. Turning to Zionism at a young age, Agnon immigrated to Palestine in 1907, quickly becoming a central figure in the nascent world of modern Hebrew literature. He would become its undisputed master.³

One might append the Swedish Academy's citation to suggest that Agnon's writing is as "characteristic" of European modernism as it is of the "Jewish people," although he perceives the European crisis through the lens of a Jewish believer in a world perhaps not without God but certainly a world from which God has receded. The result, I would like to argue, can be seen in Agnon's 1939 major novel *A Guest for the Night*, a work in which crisis and fragmentation are tucked beneath an apparently realistic textual surface.⁴ By examining the sense of death in the novel it is possible to penetrate this surface and see that by telling the story of his return to Europe, Agnon perceives and laments the death of European Judaism, and that this perception necessitates the creation of an allegorical, even post-modern novel in which narrative succumbs to death and destruction.⁵ The novel, I argue, is also a major turning point in Agnon's work. Here he enters his own death as a narrator and becomes an Author. Unconsoled

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658 by the rebirth of Jewish life in Palestine, his return to Europe is a return to a literary space of death. The death of Agnon as a narrator who is an author and his rebirth as a modern (already dead) author in the novel, is therefore in a very real sense almost beyond Zionism; at the very least, it is a denial of an organic and redemptive continuity between the Jewish past in Europe and the Zionist present and future in Palestine.

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A Guest for the Night is one of Agnon's central works and his first full-scale novel set in contemporary Europe.⁶ The novel was written in 1938 and published serially in the *Haaretz* newspaper in 1939, as Hitler invaded Poland. The novel is overtly biographical: it tells the story of a writer, Shmuel Agnon, a native of Shibush who immigrates to Palestine at the beginning of the century and builds a home there. His house is burnt down in the 1929 riots. Now in midlife, he sends his wife and children to Germany to stay with relatives; he returns to his hometown, a literary simulacrum of Agnon's Galician hometown of Buczacz. The town he returns to has changed, and painfully so; its physical features and its once thriving Jewish population have been devastated by the wars, including the Russo-Polish war of 1919–1920, in which the mass killings of Jews have all but fallen into oblivion in the wake of subsequent events.⁷ The writer, supported by the low value of Polish currency, uses the compensation he receives from the British mandate authorities in Palestine to stay in his hometown for almost a year. During this year he resides in a small family-run hotel and attempts to revive the old *Beit Midrash* (house of study). In the course of this attempt the narrator meets many of the town's inhabitants who invoke the more and less remote past of Jewish life in the town. The novel ends with the narrator's failure to revive the town's *Beit Midrash*. He returns to Palestine with his wife and children—and with the key to the *Beit Midrash*, which he thought he had lost.

By examining the sense of death in the novel, one can see beyond the verisimilitude of the narrative and understand how Agnon's literary position was decidedly political. A large portion of the narrative is dedicated to the impossibility of surviving as a Jew in Poland. This is clearly due to the obliteration of the Jews' role as social and economic mediators in an undemocratic society that was deeply stratified by class.⁸ Modernity and nationalism in Europe obviated the Jew, whose main attribute is his otherness; even after 800 years in Poland, he is considered non-native. Agnon sees and understands this but is not blinded by the Zionist view that seeks to remedy this situation by giving Jews access to land and indigenous privilege in the historical homeland of Palestine.

It is within this historical frame that Agnon's novel binds the literary and the political discourses by undoing the continuity of space. He turns to a representation of space as a literary space of death and disrupts the supposedly natural flow of Jews and Judaism from (dead) Europe to Palestine. In order to support these claims, it is necessary to examine the mode of discourse and representation of the novel through a figurative inquiry. By examining the trope of death, figurative language can be seen as the point

where the political and literary spheres meet to form the main theatre of cultural dynamics. Finally, I locate the voice of the author not in the words of the diegetic narrator but rather in the fragmented discourse of the handicapped baby Raphael, with whom the narrator has some very meaningful meetings.⁹

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The search for a modern death begins with the romantic notion that a life not endangered is not really lived.¹⁰ This conception of death also sets the stage for the modern spectacle of mass death brought about by the First World War and propagated by new technologies and modes of representation.¹¹ Heidegger sees the modern problem of giving sense and meaning to death as one that finds its ground in the place where the individual meets the community:

If fateful Da-sein essentially exists as being-in-the-world in being-with others, its occurrence is an occurrence-with and is determined as *destiny*. With this term, we designate the occurrence of the community, of a people. Destiny is not composed of individual fates, nor can being-with-one-another be conceived of as the mutual occurrence of several subjects. These fates are already guided beforehand in being-with-one-another in the same world and in the resoluteness for the definite possibilities. In communication and in battle the power of destiny first becomes free. The fateful destiny of Da-sein in and with its "generation" constitutes the complete, authentic occurrence of Da-sein.¹²

This passage is left quite unexplained by Heidegger, but it seems clear that it is in war that Da-sein is at its most authentic, war being the place where the normal existential relation to death is reversed. If in everyday life Da-sein is related to an inevitable possibility of its own death, in war it would seem that death is inevitable and survival becomes a possibility. The power of destiny is freed when Da-sein is faced with the national community, determined as such by the shared certainty of death. As loaded as this passage may be, it suggests what Georges Bataille later conceives as the "Community of Death."¹³ What Bataille argues is that death is the only place where the community is such; therefore, it remains unknowable and unrepresentable. In other words, one must draw a distinction between the community as that which is a property of the subject and that which appropriates the subject. In this, Bataille prefigures Foucault's later description of the appropriation of life itself by the modern state, what he calls biopolitics. It seems that what Heidegger describes as Da-sein's most authentic being is an existential description and perhaps even exaltation of biopolitics—in which life itself becomes the subject of politics.

All this seems rather removed from the small-town world Agnon describes in *A Guest for the Night*. Yet it is exactly these relations between individual, community, and power that Zionism addresses in seeking to self-manage the Jewish population. In the novel they take form through the figure of the Zionist author in search of a community that has been lost but might be reborn in the old-new country. In fact when Lev Pinsker, in *Autoemancipation*, jump-starts Zionism, he begins with the analysis

660 that the Jews are the walking dead.¹⁴ What follows from Pinsker's analysis is that all forms of Zionism are concerned with teaching the Jews to live; in terms of modern nationalism, this means teaching them to die a national death.

By shifting the traditional paradigms of the meaning of life Zionism suggests a politicization of the Jews that radically changes the meaning of Jewish death: if once Jewish (violent) death was justified by the dedication to God, modern Jewish (violent) death becomes acceptable only as a sacrifice to the nation or people.¹⁵ These ideas are present in the structure of Agnon's narrative. The return of the Zionist author to his "dead" native town shows just how different the Jewish sense of death and sense of community are from the European ones. In Hebrew, the notion of community itself is that which shares ground facing a voice: *kehila* is derived from the word "voice," *kol*. The Zionist sense of community does not necessarily change this, and the voice of the author becomes the communal (national) voice as the author comes into his death. Though Zionism is a product of the meeting between Judaism and European nationalism, it is also its victim. A rebellious subversive current is present within Zionism, and it is apparent in the work of Agnon.

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At first it seems that *A Guest for the Night* should be read ideologically. The narrator is a writer returning to his hometown, and he is a Zionist in an almost obtuse manner. Materially he is much better off than his fellow Jews, and he quickly becomes a small-scale philanthropist. On such a reading one would understand his attempt to resurrect the old *beit midrash* as an expression of victorious Zionism coming to the rescue of ailing European Judaism. Such a reading requires us to deem realistic the novel's representation of the devastated circumstances that the narrator finds. It also requires us to identify the narrator with the biographical Agnon. The bare facts clearly point to such a simple identity, and this has brought all leading interpreters of the novel to equate the narrator with the writer without reservations.¹⁶

Motivated in the end by political considerations, the identity between author and narrator is crucial since it sees the narrative voice as designating the writer who, at least linguistically, is alive, and who in turn indicates a real external world. This approach has not been affected by the deconstruction of the Author.¹⁷ Though few readers would perhaps uphold this position theoretically, they are happy to do so when it comes to discussing Agnon and for the whole right-wing of Hebrew letters he remains the undisputed authority and source of meaning in his works.¹⁸

Since most of the episodes in *A Guest for the Night* seem realistic, such a view does not seem unnatural. It underscores the importance of understanding the sense of death in the novel, since this provides a way to cut through the screen of verisimilitude and to review the major interpretations of the novel. Such a revision is necessary if one is to claim that we are dealing with an allegorical novel that systematically undermines its links to the world outside the text. Though such a view destabilizes the author, it does

not necessarily exclude the viability of discussing Agnon's work historically; in doing so, it will always be forming a tentative allegory of continuity that remains conscious of its own temporality.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that readings of the novel have thus far seen it in the kind of realistic light that poses few problems of interpretation. This leads some to even conclude that: "The narrator who entered the story has died as a personality: he has discovered his *Shibush* is no more, and he therefore undergoes a rebirth signified in the birth and circumcision of the child who will bear his name"¹⁹ This further demonstrates the importance of understanding the sense of death, since it turns out that a realistic reading describes a linear process in which the narrator's life is a kind of flame passed on to a supposedly 'human' baby. In these terms the narrator's death is a metaphor mediating between himself and the baby, both conceived as 'alive'; death is a figure, a symbolic mode binding the generations that create a living national body. In this view, the imagined nation is a reality of which the real person is only a figure, a *synecdoche*.²⁰

These critical efforts to avoid an allegorical reading are evidence of a failure to negotiate between the means of enunciation and the layers of meaning. In fact it seems that interpretations of the novel divide along this collision. While some see it as the failure of the narrator to 'know himself,'²¹ others see it as the meeting of autobiographical realism with the explicitly unrealistic level representing the narrator's past, a sign of a consciousness oscillating between mature metonym and childish metaphor.²²

As might be expected the "realists" settle this discrepancy by amplifying another reality. Dan Laor, Agnon's biographer, admits that Agnon only spent a week in his hometown and that his reports from the visit weren't bleak at all, but they assume Agnon is really writing about the events of 1938, the Arab Revolt and the preliminary acts of World War II.²³ Agnon in this view was capable of capturing the impending catastrophe inherent to the Jewish condition within European modernism, since he was equipped with Zionist ideology, which acknowledged the supremacy of the Zionist enterprise over doomed Jewish life in the Diaspora.²⁴

Amplifying reality and psychologizing the writer are related practices designed to maintain Agnon as the authority in the novel and as such a Zionist one. The resistance to allegory can therefore be explained by its being the beginning of the deconstruction of the text and its meaning. Such a procedure undermines the whole symbolic system that ideologically binds the subject to the public in the modern national literary canon.²⁵ This is obviously the political motivation behind the hesitation to apply deconstructive literary theory to Agnon's work. This is also why the core element of the novel's sense of death, the death of the Author, is ignored. By death of the Author I mean the metaphysical elimination of the Author from the text and his conversion into language. Blanchot found this to be the essence of modern literary space, epitomized by Kafka, another author aware of the decline of western civilization into new forms of barbarity. Both Kafka and Agnon, in Blanchot's words, are quite conscious of the empty vanity of a claim for immortality in literature. They dissolve the narrative life into a literary space of death.²⁶

As seen above, the determination of the novel's mode of representation is crucial for any reading. The importance of this is revealed as *A Guest for the Night* opens with a description of the arrival of the narrator at his hometown, Shibush. This, I argue, is an entrance into a dead world that takes place within a loose system of allegorical representation, making little effort to mask its artifice and death-like representation of a world that is not alive.

Emphasizing the alienation between author and artifact, the novel opens with a tableau of exposed death and destruction. Everything takes place on the eve of Yom Kippur, when God decides life or death, and begins with a meeting between the narrator and the station attendant, Gumowitch - literally rubber man in Hebrew—who announces the train's arrival at the Shibush station. The guest gets off the train and, like Dante in the middle of his life, he cannot find his way: "It takes an ordinary man a half hour to walk to the center of town; carrying baggage, it takes a quarter of an hour more. I took an hour and a half: every house, every ruin, every heap of rubbish faced me and held me up" (AGN, 2).

The narrator is being as realistic as he can be. He explains precisely why he was held up, but this delay has no reason if the text is not the world, as is made clear in the description of the town that follows:

Of the large houses of two, three, or four stories, nothing was left except the lower levels, and those were also mostly ruined. And of some houses nothing remained at all but their place. Even the King's Well, from which Sobiesky, King of Poland, has drunk when he returned victorious from war, has its steps broken, its commemorative tablet fractured; the golden letters of his name were faded and sprouted weeds as red as blood, as if the angel of death had wiped his knife upon them. There were no gentile boys and girls standing and not a sound of laughter or singing could be heard, and the well spouted water pouring it into the street, as it is poured in the neighborhood of the dead. All the places had changed. Even the space between houses had changed. Nothing was as I had seen it when I was small, nor as it was shown to me in a dream shortly before my return. But the odor of Shibush had not yet changed. (AGN, 2)

The scene is almost a typical baroque allegory and has little in common with Agnon's visit to Buczacz in 1930 when, according to his own testimony, he was received as a king, the streets crowded with people who would not leave his side.²⁷ But here all is empty. One does not really have to confront reality to know this since the description formulaically represents an entrance into a space of death, into allegory. Every word in this description is somehow related to the line engraving the difference between nature and meaning. As Walter Benjamin wrote:

In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history

as the passion of the world; its importance resides only in the stations of its decline. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance. But if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical.²⁸

The feeling of having entered a dead world increases when one takes into account the fact that Agnon had revised the novel from the first Hebrew edition of 1939 to the second, published in 1950. While the Yiddish modernist Yakov Glatstein found he could not complete his *Yash* trilogy, which tells of a similar return, because his historical analysis had collapsed in the face of the Shoah²⁹, Agnon had no trouble making changes—though he did not make any that actually change the plot or its core meaning. If we look at the entrance scene, we see that the changes he made only further accentuated the feeling of entering a dead world that already inhabited the text in the 1939 edition. For example, in the first edition the weeds that grow around Sobiesky's Well are just weeds, while in the later edition, the one quoted, they are “as red as blood, as if the angel of death had wiped his knife on them.” In the first edition the water pours from the well as if someone had died in a house, while in the later edition the house turns into a whole neighborhood, an echo of the belief that the angel of death dips his sword in the waters near the deceased in order to sharpen it, therefore contaminating them. It is clear that this kind of revision, made only a few years after the Shoah, is possible only because the world of the story is already dead, and the death of the author in this world has already indicated the destruction of Jewish life in Europe—that is, before it physically came about.³⁰

One should notice here that signs of reality, such as Shibush's unchanged smell, impede the allegorical reading. Certainly this is a reality effect as Roland Barthes described it, a signifier that has no function beyond the designation of reality.³¹ This brings us back to the notion that verisimilitude is of the very nature of allegory, as allegorical paintings clearly demonstrate; it does not entail an absence of story, as Paul de Man puts it: “It is a part of allegory that, despite its obliqueness and innate obscurity, the resistance to understanding emanates from the difficulty or censorship inherent in the statement and not from the devices of enunciation.”³² This means that the claim of allegory pertains to the meaning of the narrative and to the way it is constantly deconstructed, exposing the artificiality of representation.³³ It is fundamental in allegory to face this hesitation between modes of reading, just as deconstruction has no meaning without structure. Both require a conflict between an interpretation that makes fiction real and one that sees reality as fictitious.

As Agnon the narrator enters the town he meets his wood-legged Virgil, Daniel Bach. Bach lost his leg not in the war but in his struggle for livelihood. He leads the narrator to the hotel where he will stay during the whole visit. A broken family runs the hotel, which is itself a broken figure of a home in which ruined men come to stay for the night. Bach's importance as a guide is twofold: on the level of faith he presents the narrator with a real problem, and he also leads us to his son, baby Raphael, who in my interpretation is a figure of the Author.

664 In the area of faith Daniel Bach presents a challenge not in that he is a heretic, but in that, significantly, his heresy is based on the view that God is in fact involved in history. The following dialogue takes place between the narrator, Daniel Bach, and Daniel's father, who is about to go to Palestine and join the kibbutz of his son, Yerucham, who was killed in the clashes in Kibbutz Ramat Rachel, not far from Agnon's home in Jerusalem.

How pleasant my journey would be if you promised me, my son, that you would follow the right way. Daniel jumped up from his chair, placed his right hand on his heart and pointed upwards with his left. Perhaps it was I that made the way crooked, he said, it was He that made it so. Leave it be, said his father, Leave it be. Whatever the Almighty does He does in order to test us. If we stand the test, all the better, and if not, he sends another one, more difficult. Said Daniel, Doesn't the Almighty see that we can't stand his first tests that he troubles himself to putting us to new ones? (AGN, 33)

The discussion is about history and the role of God in it, the question being whether it expresses the will of God or not. The tendency to judge history in moral terms, though obvious, demands explanation. Following Barthes' observation about the moral character of narrative, Hayden White explains the shift from the writing of chronicles to the writing of history as the entrance of a teleological moral into the way a series of events is perceived.³⁴ It seems Agnon is well aware of this, though not unlike Benjamin he finds history to be a secular concept lacking a messianic dimension. The chronicle is then an acceptance of the world as it is, while history allows moral judgment and a view of it as a manifestation of divine will. The passage from the father's faith, in the world's hardships as a test, to the son, who finds such testing techniques unworthy of worship, is only natural and quite an acute observation on the nature of Jewish secularization through *Haskala* (Jewish enlightenment). This goes a long way to explaining the concept of Jewish history and Zionism in Agnon's later works. The disintegration of the narrated world into allegory seems to grow from the incapacity of Jewish narrative to find a morality that is not messianic. Agnon is actually avoiding history in this way, or, rather, he is exposing its *facies hippocratica*. This of course further serves to explain the resistance to deconstruction in the Agnon School that is ill at ease admitting its own Zionist messianic dimension.

Overwhelmed by history, the sense of death undergoes change, the narrative no longer represents life, or a public, but *Hurban*—disaster—the layers of rubble laid one on top of the other, an archeological site to which only God can give meaning as a whole. Death of course is omnipresent in the story but never mimetically, only as another example of an infinite chain, always opposed to the seemingly live figure of the narrator, forcing us to re-question his status in the novel. Once we realize the ruined nature of the world in the novel the question of the author's death becomes all the more imperative, since if he is alive in that world one could and perhaps should remain faithful to a Zionist interpretation of organic continuity of Jewish life in Palestine.

Perhaps one can begin by noticing that it is made very clear that the narrator is not actually the one who has written the story, as we are told in the end:

And here I must explain how, if I am a writer, I let the time pass and did not write a thing all those days I dwelt in Shibush. Well if something comes and knocks on my heart I send it away, when it knocks again I say: don't you know I hate the smell of ink? When I see that I have no escape I do my work, if only so that I shall not be pestered again. Those days I spent in my town many things came and knocked on my heart. Since I sent them off they all went away and never came back. (AGN, 449)

Even though Cervantes had already ridden through this position some time before, it still seems the point can be lost at times; in fact, the accepted reading of this passage is that it is a violation of the narrative illusion that serves to cement the bond between narrator and author.³⁵ This is possible, of course, but this view requires us to negate language and cling to the person of the author as a source of meaning. Both editions are identical at this point, and I find it more sensible, if not more meaningful, to accept that the narrator is a writer but not the author of his story - only the narrator.

In my view *A Guest for the Night* is the place where Agnon transforms the Author, tearing him away from the narrator. This rupture destabilizes the fiction, and we must draw some conclusions. This is what is avoided when reading continues to be of a text as mimetic of consciousness. The narrator as a writer and as a persona in the novel merits psychological analysis. Agnon is merciless: he exposes the narrator as an unconscious, obtuse, rather self-righteous person from beginning to end. The Author on the other hand is a medium, a vehicle of the text and of language, and he cannot be reconstructed from the text since he does not construct or control it.

The resiliency of criticism in front of the rift between text and author exposes what Foucault would consider our desire to see the human as a rational being, implied, according to him, in the modern concept of the author.³⁶ The allegorical impulse tends to come equipped with a pessimistic view of human nature and destiny, a point that is emphasized by the disintegration of the line separating life and death. The uncanny status of death in the story demonstrates this. An example of this can be seen in the disappearance of Hanoach, a traveling peddler who is found after the winter frozen and clinging to his horse Enoch. Before he is found we are told:

Not like Hanoach who troubled the Enoch for nothing, and now they are both wandering in the world of chaos and no one knows where they are. Some say that they showed themselves in a dream. And why did they not ask Hanoach where he is? Because he showed himself dead and they were afraid to speak with a dead man. (AGN, 215)

Death is not only the rule of the world represented but of the literary in itself. Besides speaking of death and the dead, all signs of life in the text are like the water in Sobiesky's Well, signifying death and absence. The narrator's visit to the local cemetery is therefore a natural site for such a reflection:

I walk among the graves and think of nothing at all, but the two emissaries of the heart, these my two eyes, gaze and see. These eyes are under control of the heart, and the heart belongs to Him who gives life or death. Sometimes he allows contemplating the living, sometimes the dead.

Those that died before the war and those who died in the war and those that died after the war lie here together, as if there were no difference between them. So long as they lived, some were sorry for times that have been and will never come back and some expected those to come, since they became dead, these have lost their assumptions and the former grieve no more.

All the powers of the eye are measured, and a man sees only to the measure of his eyes. But the dead, even if you lay your eyes one upon the other, still they come and stand before you and you fathom their parable. (AGN, 82)

Craig Owens explained that in allegory the concept of time is non-linear and events happen simultaneously, vertically, like views given one on top of the other—just like the views in the cemetery.³⁷ Likewise all the crises dealt with in the novel are laid vertically, one on top of the other: the narrator's midlife crisis, the crisis of Judaism, of European modernity, faith, marriage, the crisis of representation - all are simultaneous, or at least do not occur in an empty homogenous time. The narrator does in fact die, but not at a certain point in time, and not *simply*. His death occurs on the level in which writing effaces the existence of the person writing. Although the death of the author is hardly a new concept, it is nevertheless relevant here. The measure of the eye's sight discussed in front of the dead is explained by the poetic turn. The bond between life and work is limiting since life is revealed to us in a limited manner. This limit is surpassed when confronted with the dead, when you understand the fable of the dead as an allegory of the world.

It is then the dead presence of the author, in the diegetic world carried by the narrator, that is the cause of the metaphysical presence of Agnon the writer and the residue of Agnon in person. As Barthes explains:

As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (DA, 142)

The beginning of writing is then the end of control over meaning; the author makes his entrance no longer as a person, but as an allegory of textual interpretation. Agnon at this point has stepped beyond the dichotomy represented by the conflict between life and art, into a space where life is relinquished and the author enters the literary space in which life and art no longer differ. The narrator is a character, not a person, and because he is acting out Agnon, the connection between him and Agnon is all the more dubious and ironic.

The attempt to bind the biographical Agnon to the meaning of the text, or vice versa, can only fail. The narrator is not breaking the illusion of narrative; it is already broken, fragmented by explicit intertextuality. The novel, in fact, bears the name of the ninth chapter in an earlier piece by Agnon, "*Chupat Dodim - A Lovers Canopy*," the story of a cemetery keeper who marries a dead woman.³⁸ The irony that characterizes the novel is indeed what Paul de Man names the mother of all tropes, the moment in

which language turns away, saying one thing and another, and another. The allegorical mode brings about the death of the narrator as author and writer, but in exchange it offers us the dismembered life of the text.

All of this is enticingly figured in Raphael the baby, the invalid son of Daniel Bach, who among other things is a figure of the text, of the innate interiority from which the narrator keeps departing, being himself a figure of reading. Obviously both are regular characters as well, if that can be said, but the baby also ironizes the idea that the text is born of the writer. Like a text he brings all things to him, abandoning movement in the real world and the distinction between life and art, death and life, the dead and the living. Read in a realistic key, Raphael is a heart-breaking boy, but as an allegory of the author, Raphael is a heart-warming phenomenon, uncommitted to coherence: one can find in him a glimpse of the redemptive that is characteristic of allegory. The meetings the narrator has with Raphael help to clarify the passage from a mimetic sense of death to an allegorical one. They show it to be a shift in the relations between text, author, and narrator as well as a political shift from Zionist activity to Jewish resignation and lament. It is a passage from text as a representation of a real life to a place where life, though present, remains outside the literary space, requiring all who enter to abandon hope. The meetings between the narrator as writer and the baby as author show the difference between one who still thinks he controls meaning and one who cannot control it and is devoted to catastrophe.

Agnon, pace Zionism, sees that this process of decline cannot be stopped or solved. Though Zionism allows some hope, it is only a very precarious hope, and since it has been made possible within Jewish secularization, it remains a non-redemptive one. It is here in the work of Agnon—seeped as much in traditional texts, as it is in European ones—that the fundamental inadequacy of such a notion is exposed. Zionism is a Jewish movement made possible by a reconfiguration of a sacred language and its most basic meaning—its sense of death. This does not only mean finding a national meaning to death, as seems required by Bialik in “The City of Slaughter” (written after the Kishniev pogroms of 1903), but, as Agnon does not fail to notice, it also means the displacement of the Messiah and a reconfiguration of the relationship between the text and the world.³⁹ This is very serious, since the possibility of a Jewish nation is based on that textuality, which is religious. Therefore, insofar as it is Jewish, it is allegorical; it represents the only way God can exist in the text.

In the beginning there was the Word, and Zionism’s beginnings are nothing but textual, yet this very modern notion—of a text creating reality, depicting it, and binding a community to it—runs counter to the Messiah. As the later work of Agnon shows, without the Messiah what is left of Judaism is not very interesting. In fact it is in *A Guest for the Night* that Agnon begins to turn away from Zionism and its teleological concept of history, where the state substitutes for the Messiah in the search for redemption. While the destruction of Jewish space in Europe necessitates and justifies the move to Palestine, it is deprived of any theological meaning; history itself remains a heap of catastrophes and destruction going nowhere. The only real community is the community of death and of the dead, which is, and always has been, a textual community,

668 timeless and without territory. This is a community always awaiting the coming of that which will render man One—part of a community that defies representation, the real community that can never be represented in language, and is the one always simulated, faked and abused by the nation.⁴⁰

Baby Raphael, who is familiar with Agnon's work as only an Author can be, demonstrates quite well, I think, how our journey into the sense of death serves to turn what in a mimetic reading would be a nonsensical childish discourse into a deep reflection on the nature of life, art, and the representation of both. I conclude with a quote from one of these scenes, which begins with Raphael asking about his dead uncle and living grandfather who went to Palestine. The narrator is present and the baby is talking to his parents:

And does he see my uncle Yeruham? The child asked his father. But Uncle is already dead, said his father, so how can he be seen? And if he is dead can't he be seen. No my love, said the baby's mother, he can't be seen.

The baby was silent for a while, then asked again, why did the Arab not die, the Arab was not a good man. After all he killed my uncle. What is dead? Is everyone you don't see dead? Said his mother, some of them have died and some are alive. The baby asked his mother, then how do we know who is dead and who's alive?

His mother sighed and said, my love, don't mention the dead—why?—So they won't show themselves in your dreams.—But if they're seen isn't that a sign they're alive? Mother, and is Yerluham Freeman already dead?—Why?—Because I don't see him. His mother sighed and said, of course you don't see him, that's because he stopped coming here. Why doesn't he come here? Sighed his mother, because he is happy in another place. What is another place? A place that isn't here is another place. Said the baby, and I, am I not here either? Said the mother, no my love, my darling, you're here, you're here. Why, asked the baby am I here and not in another place? Said the mother, because you, my love, are a little weak and you can't walk with your legs. Said the baby, now I know—what do you know my love?—Why all the places come to me (AGN, 153).

Notes

1. He shared the prize with German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs. <http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1966/index.html> (accessed June 28, 2006).

2. For a general account see, Marsha L. Rozenblit. *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria During World War I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 36–39.

3. Dan Laor has written an exhaustive biography of Agnon interpreted in a Zionist key: *Life of Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1994). Details of Agnon's early life are difficult to ascertain since he opted from his arrival in Palestine to construct a mythical biography.

4. S. Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night* (New York: Schocken 1968), hereafter abbreviated as AGN.

5. I am fully aware that these categories are almost empty; this is especially true in the context of Zionism, which can be seen as a modernist movement with all the biopolitical characteristics named by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995), 202–211. Still what Eric Zakim calls "Zionism's belated romanticism" seriously problematizes the discussion. It seems reasonable to say with Zakim that Zionist modernity involves a process "that melded political need and aesthetic interest, and worked to make history intervene into the natural landscape in the name of nature." *To Build*

and *be Built* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 179–180. Defying these, Agnon in *A Guest for the Night* seems to go beyond both Zionism and modernity.

6. Modern Hebrew letters and the tradition of the European novel are not easily reconciled. For a sustained discussion of their basic incompatibility and the way Agnon deals with it, see, Dan Miron, “The Domestication of the Alien Genre,” *Le Médecin Imaginaire* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 307–344. Hereafter abbreviated as LMI.

7. Overshadowed by the enormity of the Final Solution, this period is much less discussed, yet it was an important element in post-World War I Zionism and one of the forces that shaped the Third Aliyah, the wave of immigration to Palestine (1919–1923), which rehabilitated what little remained of the endeavors of Agnon’s peers from the Second Aliyah (1905–1914). For a fine volume that deals with the massacres in the Russo Polish war vis-à-vis ethnicity, see Alexander Prusin, *Nationalizing a Borderland: War, Ethnicity, and Anti-Jewish Violence in East Galicia, 1914–1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005)

8. Jazy Tomaszewsky, “Jews is the Polish Economy 1918–1939” in: Israel Bartal and Israel Gutman, *The Broken Chain—Polish Jewry through the Ages* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1997), 415–426.

9. In a recent study, Michal Arbel reads the baby Raphael as an extension of the mythical figure of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, the mythical author of the the liturgical piece *Unetanneh Tokef: Written on the Dog’s Skin* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2006), 58–82.

10. This can be seen throughout European literature. Nietzsche is clearly advocating such a concept of endangered life in the famous scene in Zarathustra when the tightrope walker falls and Zarathustra carries him off to burial. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 47–48. (Ch. 6 of the prologue). An even more poignant example is found in Pirandello’s *Il Fu Mattia Pascal*, which tells in 1904 of Mattia Pascal’s inability to die without the sanction of the modern state. The impossibility of dying outside bureaucracy can also be seen as a limit of the self conceived as an object of design, an attitude that Foucault describes as the essence of the modern attitude in Baudelaire: “The Salon of 1859” *Art in Paris 1845–1862*, ed. Jonathan Mayne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 144–149; Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” *Essential works of Michel Foucault*, ed. Paul Rainbow, Vol. 1 (New York: New York Press, 1994), 309–312. Uncannily, Agnon’s first full length piece, *And the Crooked Shall be Straight*, published in Palestine in 1912 tells a similar story of a man who loses his identity and his life yet is undead.

11. Recent scholarship engaged with the work W. G. Sebald, for example, has developed this field of study in ways that cannot be discussed here. See, Julia Hell, “The Angels Enigmatic Eyes, or The Gothic Beauty of Catastrophic History in W.G. Sebald’s “Air War and Literature,”” *Criticism*, 46.3 (2004): 361–392, and in the same volume, Todd Presner, ““What an Artificial and Synoptic View Reveals’: Extreme History and the Modernism of W.G. Sebald’s Realism,”” 341–360.

12. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 352.

13. This discussion begins with Bataille’s comments on Nietzsche in *Achéphale* 3–4 (1937): 16–23. It seems the best treatment of this complex relation is: Roberto Esposito, *Categorie dell’impolitico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999), 245–261.

14. Tellingly, the pamphlet was written in German, the language of the “enlightened” Jews. An English translation is found in Arthur Hertzberg, ed. *The Zionist Idea* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 181–197.

15. Though this process becomes most explicit in Zionism, it is already a salient feature of Jewish Enlightenment discourse. See, Dan Miron, *Ashkenaz: Modern Hebrew Literature and the Pre-Modern German Jewish Experience* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1989).

16. Dan Laor, Agnon’s biographer, even finds the creative process of *A Guest for the Night* unique in comparison to other large works by him, since in this novel “Agnon set out to write a fictional autobiography, first and foremost in order to bear witness to a well defined and powerful personal experience he underwent in his visit to Poland in 1930”: “A Voyage and its Breakdown,” *Agnon Research*, eds. Hillel Weiss and Hillel Barzel (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1994), 261–282.

17. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–148. Hereafter abbreviated as DA. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author," *Essential works of Michel Foucault*, ed. Paul Rainbow, Vol. 2 (New York: The New York Press, 1997), 205–222. Hereafter abbreviated as WIA. Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 16.

18. It really is surprising how little the study of Agnon had been affected by recent developments in literary theory. The main reason for this seems to be the insistence on reading Agnon in a strictly Hebrew and Zionist context as well as the attempted appropriation of Agnon by the religious Zionist right-wing based around Bar Ilan University. Understandably, this type of scholarship is concentrated on philological research into the religious origins of Agnon's textuality. See: Hillel Weiss, *Kol Haneshama* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1985). It is of small surprise that most of the innovative work in the field arrives from the US. See, for example: Ann Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return* (Albany: New York State University Press, 1991), 23–54.

19. This conclusion is based on the premise that "The meaning and the tone of the novel, sustained from beginning to end by a simple plot outline and a series of homogenous episodes, are all but inescapable." Arnold J Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 283–284; 327 One may also record here the novelty of Arnold Band's comprehensive study of Agnon that was the first of its kind and was only grudgingly and slowly accepted in Hebrew literary studies.

20. This conception of death together with the notion that it is a simple story, lead other interpreters to rule out an allegorical reading of the novel, among them, Gershon Shaked who concludes that what binds Agnon's eyewitness narrator to the authentic writer, in an absolute manner, is having witnessed. This according to Shaked is what turns the experience into a 'large experience' endowing the personal with national meaning and making the national personal. See: Gershon Shaked, "The Narrator as Author in *A Guest for the Night*," *Hasifrut* 1 (1968), 17–35. Hereafter abbreviated as GK. For a discussion of national continuity figures, see Guy Hermet, *Nazioni e nazionalismi in Europa* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), 120–124.

21. LMI, 342.

22. Although furnished with an obsolete theoretical vocabulary, Shimon Halkin's reading remains one of the most sensitive and insightful, "On *A Guest for the Night*" in *S. Y. Agnon a Selection of Articles* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1982), 204.

23. Laor pushes the problem aside, claiming that Agnon's work illustrates the difference between history and poetry in Aristotle's terms—what was, compared to what could have been. Dan Laor, *S. Y. Agnon: New Perspectives*, (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1995), 174.

24. *Ibid.*, 168

25. This is especially true of Zionism, which can be seen as the imposition of literary unity over a fragmented territory. An important contribution to this study can be found in Hanan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), esp. 71–76.

26. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 75.

27. The reconstruction of Agnon's voyage to Poland is based mainly on his letters to his wife Esther and to his publisher and patron, Zalman Schocken. Both are available in Hebrew. *Esterline my Dear* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1983), 260–262; *S. Y. Agnon—S. Z. Schocken: Correspondence* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1991).

28. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: NLB, 1977), 343.

29. It is telling that Glatstein tried to write the third part of the trilogy and some of it was published in the fifties. In retrospect, it turns out to be more a repetition of the second part than a new beginning and Glatstein wisely discontinued the attempt. Dan Miron, "Epilogue" in Jacob Glatstein, *When Yash Went*, trans. Dan Miron (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1994), 210.

30. The extent and seriousness of Agnon's references to Jewish tradition have been discussed at length, and it will suffice here to note how a reading of the Jewish and non-Jewish intertexts of the work create a unique fragmentary effect that is rather typical of allegory. A discussion of this effect

in different terms can be found in Mary Orr's discussion of Riffattere, *Intertextuality* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003), 37–40.

31. Roland Barthes, 'L'effet d'réale' in Zvetan Todorov ed., *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11–17.

32. Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 51.

33. The example of the smell of Shibush serves to further demonstrate the allegorical nature of the novel when compared to Agnon's earliest long work, *And the Crooked Shall be Straight*. In this story Rabbi Menashe returns to Buczacz, Agnon's native town that only later acquires the literary name Shibush, meaning distortion in Hebrew. Rabbi Menashe returns only to find out that he is considered dead and must remain that way. The scene is almost parallel to the one in *A Guest for the Night*, the significant difference being that here the narrator is returning alive to a dead town in an allegorical narrative, while Rabbi Menashe is a dead man returning to a live town in a mimetic narrative. When returning Rabbi Menashe finds the town unchanged except for the smell, which, he begs our pardon, is the smell of pig excrement: S.Y. Agnon, *Elu Velu* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1974), 118.

34. Hayden White, *The Content of Form* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 1–25.

35. GK, 35.

36. WIA, 220–221.

37. An excellent account of the discussion is in G. Day, "Allegory: Between Deconstruction and Dialectics," *Oxford Art Journal* 22.1 (1999):103–18.

38. S. Y. Agnon, *The Handles of the Lock* (Jerusalem: Schocken 1974), 429–448.

39. For a dazzling account of this process see: Binyamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), esp. 173–176. Bialik's poem has been the topic of intense discussion as the centennial of the pogrom and the poem arrived in 2003. See Dan Miron, ed. *In the City of Slaughter—A Visit at Twilight* (Tel Aviv: Resling 2005).

40. Jean Luc Nancy engages these ideas in slightly different terms as he tries to undo the sense of community. In dialogue with Bataille and Blanchot, he suggests a community that has in common its difference and its lack of purpose. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).