

INTRODUCTION

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The decisions of the Nobel committee on literature have often been curious, but the award of the prize for 1966 to S. Y. Agnon (together with Nelly Sachs) was not one of those instances. At the time, Agnon was generally regarded as the greatest modern Hebrew writer, and the prize richly deserved. It was also an important moment for Israel and its citizens because this was the first time—and so far the only time—a Hebrew writer was given the award, and the honor was taken as a recognition of the achievements of this new literature in general. Agnon lived just long enough to take great pleasure in the honor and to enjoy the tributes given him not only in Israel but in the United States, which he visited for the first time the year after the award. Agnon died in 1970 at the age of eighty-two.

Agnon's output was prodigious. He wrote and published continuously from 1905 to his death, after which fourteen more volumes appeared, to be placed alongside the several versions of the collected stories and novels that came out in his lifetime. Agnon was a ceaseless rewriter, and there is scarcely a major text in his oeuvre that has not undergone several revisions. Although Agnon's forte was the story in all its short and long forms, he also wrote five major novels and devoted himself to compiling thematic anthologies of Jewish classical sources. Rather than turning from one form

and immersing himself in another, Agnon would typically work on several projects in different genres at one time. Because the ongoing body of his work is dynamic, polyphonic and unstable, it has been difficult for critics to divide Agnon's career into usefully identifiable phases. Yet despite these challenges, most students of Agnon would point to the twenty years following his return to Palestine from Germany in 1924 as the high water mark in the master's career. All of his novels were published or written during this time, as were the modernist parables collected in *The Book of Deeds* [Sefer Hama'asim]. These latter were the stories that changed the way contemporary readers perceived Agnon. Initially viewing him as a teller of naïve tales of Polish Jewry, readers subsequently came to accept him as an ironic modern master.

From the end of World War Two to his death, Agnon continued to write, revise and publish prolifically, but the work produced during this period seemed to most critics to be a continuation of the various modes, genres and themes of his earlier writing. It is generally assumed that this creative activity was aimed at tying up loose ends, bringing projects to fruition and extending the range of previously secured innovations.

It is now clear that this conception of Agnon's last phase needs to undergo a fundamental revision. We can now see that one of Agnon's postwar projects was entirely new: a preoccupying, ambitious, large-scale undertaking that represented a fundamental rethinking of the master's relationship to the world of Eastern Europe. This is the epic cycle of stories—close to 150 of them—written during the 1950s and 1960s about Buczac, the Galician town, today in the eastern Ukraine, in which Agnon grew up and lived until his emigration to Palestine at the age of nineteen in 1907. None of the material appears in any earlier collection. The whole was compiled by the Agnon's daughter Emumah Yaron, according to her father's instructions, and published under the title *Ir umelo'ah* [*A City in Its Fullness*] in 1973. The story cycle endeavors to give an account of Buczac during the two hundred years that followed the devastating Khmel'nitski massacres of 1648. Taken together, the stories constitute Agnon's comprehensive effort, after the annihilation of

European Jewry, to think through the question of what from that lost culture should be retrieved through the resources of the literary imagination. *‘Ir umelo’ah* was hardly noticed when it was published, and it remains largely unknown to the non-Hebrew reading world. Yet I would argue that it is one of the most extraordinary responses to the murder of European Jewry in modern Jewish writing. *Hamashal vehanimshal*, the novella from that collection presented and translated here as *The Parable and Its Lesson*, reaches back in time to explore the responses to the 1648 massacres in light of our implicit awareness of the great catastrophe of our era. It is a good representative of the larger project of the Buczacz tales because it is concerned both with capturing the pathos of a historical moment in the fortunes of the city and with the ways in which narrative and voice refract reality. Agnon’s passion remained the disingenuous act of storytelling. *The Parable and Its Lesson*, with its two narrators and sustained monologue and intriguing fissures, provides an excellent instance of Agnon’s mature narrative energies at full tilt.

What is Agnon for us today? Does he number among those once-famous writers who now seem to belong to another time and another world of taste? To be sure, his portrait and quotations from his Nobel Prize speech appear on the fifty-shekel note in Israel, but that only guarantees him a place alongside other forgotten founders. Or does Agnon’s work qualify as being a true classic, if we understand a classic as literature that, despite its rootedness in a particular time and place and conventions of writing, nonetheless possesses enough surplus of meaning to speak to us now? For the present, Agnon’s place among cultured readers in Israel is secure, although the increasing polarization between secular and religious culture may eventually endanger that status; for the former he may come to seem too foreign and the for latter impure simply for being literature. For young people, Agnon is one of those standard authors you have to get through for exams, even though sensitive readers will often rediscover him as adults. Reading Agnon is not easy. Even committed and discriminating readers who are native speakers of Hebrew have to deal with many unfamiliar references, especially if they lack a background in traditional

Jewish texts. The fact that Agnon continues to be read despite these obstacles provides evidence for the claim that he is indeed a classic.

But for a true classic, there is an additional high hurdle: translatability. When the nuances and the echoes and puns and the rhythm are shorn from the work, does it still excite us? In Agnon's case the record is mixed. The translators who have sought to preserve the special strangeness of Agnon's Hebrew have been less successful than those who have been willing to sacrifice a great deal in order to create a simulacrum that works as literature in English. It of course makes a great deal of difference what kind of Agnon is being translated. He wrote continuously for more than sixty years, and he wrote in different genres. For example, his first novel, *Hakbnasat kalah* [The Bridal Canopy, 1931] concerns the peregrinations of a poor Hasid in search of a dowry for his daughters among the townlets of Galicia in the early nineteenth century. This sprawling comic narrative is heavy with biblical allusions and parodies of religious practices and anecdotes about rabbinic sages. Putting such a work into English—it was done, unevenly, by I. M. Lask in 1967—throws up a very different set of problems than works written in a mode closer to European realism, such as Agnon's second novel, *Sipur pashut* [A Simple Story, 1935], translated, superbly, by Hillel Halkin in 1985. Set in Agnon's hometown of Buczacz in the years before World War One, the novel follows the psychological breakdown and recovery of the son of an established merchant family. Although here too there are allusions and submerged subtexts, the object of representation is a much more familiar bourgeois world in which religious learning plays little role.

For the present occasion, we have gone to the difficult end of the Agnon spectrum and chosen to translate a work that poses steep challenges and, because it is a riveting work of art, offers steep rewards as well. First published in *Haaretz* in 1958, *The Parable and Its Lesson* is not well known even to aficionados of Agnon in Israel. Set in the late seventeenth century, it is an account of the journey taken by a rabbi and his shamash, his assistant, into Gehinnom, the Underworld, for the purpose of freeing a teenage bride from the bonds of widowhood. The scenes of

horrible and peculiar torments they witness there are gruesome in themselves; worse still are the received notions of sin and punishment that they seem to overturn. The journey to Gehinnom is described as part of the testimony that the shamash gives in his own defense at a trial that takes place fifty-four years after the events. The story shows us Buczacz at two removes: in the immediate aftermath of the Khmelnitski massacres, the community struggles to reconstitute itself and mourn its losses, and then a half-century later when the now-prosperous community is on the verge of a disturbing complacency.

This is a truly exciting piece of literature that is unparalleled in the rest of modern Jewish writing. It is also difficult, difficult in Hebrew, and in translation all the more so. This difficulty comes in several specific varieties, and it has been our aim in this edition to account for them and compensate for them in various ways. First, we have provided a glossary of Hebrew terms for readers who are not familiar with traditional Jewish life. We have retained a number of Hebrew terms in the translation—and naturalized them by not italicizing them—because there are simply no adequate English equivalents. A chief example is the main character of the story. To call the shamash, the assistant who accompanies the rabbi on the journey to Gehinnom, a sexton or a beadle is awkward and foreign to the historical context.

Second, we have provided an extensive set of notes that explain biblical allusions, references to the rabbinic literature and medieval compositions, theological concepts from Kabbalah, abstruse ritual practices and relevant historical events. We have chosen not to interfere with the flow of the text by placing endnote or footnote numbers next to the terms that are explained in the notes; rather, we have placed the notes at the end and marked them according to the pages on which appear the terms they explain. They are there, in other words, for those who want them. There are different kinds of readers. For some, the story can be read with pleasure and understanding without recourse to much of the information in the notes; and this is not because that information is already known but because it is not truly necessary to take in the story. Other readers feel

intrigued or provoked by unfamiliar references, and they wish to have that gap filled in even if it means an interruption in the flow of reading.

Finally, there are difficulties that have little to do with translation or cultural literacy. These are perplexing interpretive problems that are inherent in the story. Why does the shamash wait a half century to tell his story? What practical purpose is served by the rabbi's descent into Gehinnom? Why does the story devote so much attention to the ceremonies commemorating the dead of 1648? Why did Agnon name the story *The Parable and Its Lesson* when the parable in question contributes little to our enlightenment? Hence the usefulness of the interpretive essay that accompanies the story. The essay first describes how Agnon embarked on the massive cycle of the Buczacz stories as a unique response to the murder of European Jewry and how he developed a set of narrative techniques for this project that required a departure from how he wrote in the past. The essay then enters the thicket of interpretive difficulties in the story itself and proposes ways of reading that attempt to make sense of Agnon's narrative choices. In sum, it is our wager that even a difficult Agnon text—so long as it is a superb Agnon text, as we believe this one to be—can be enjoyed in translation provided the necessary interpretive resources. We hope that reading this one Buczacz tale will stimulate interest in the larger project of which it is a part.

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