



David Aberbach. *At the Handles of the Lock: Themes in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon*.  
Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985. 221 pp. \$29.95.

The Agnon who emerges from Aberbach's thematic study has a familiar, modernist look. He is likened to Eliot, to Lawrence, to Joyce, and, most of all, to Kafka. Unfortunately, Aberbach is better at suggesting parallels than he is at exploring them:

Agonesque passivity, like that in Kafka's writing, appears to result from a prior act of submission in childhood, undermining self-respect and inhibiting self-assertion. It betrays a lifelong need to return home, either physically or psychologically, a need which can never be satisfied. It is also a cultural and social phenomenon, and a many-sided tactic, a symptom of fear or apathy, a turning inward, a form of flight.

What these generalizations have to do with Kafka—or more to the point, with Agnon—is not clear, but Aberbach's study regularly serves them up at the end of chapters.

To be sure, the *bulk* of Aberbach's attention is directed to the themes he has isolated—passivity, loneliness, childishness, triangles (Freudian and otherwise), Oedipal preoccupations, schizoid tendencies, etc.—and it is here that Aberbach's easy familiarity with the Agnon canon will be especially helpful to students with a term paper to hammer out.

As Aberbach would have it, Agnon's fiction is so much thinly disguised autobiography: in each case, his "themes" generate from his life. For example, Aberbach tells us that "Agnon wrote 'The Well of Miriam' at the time of his mother's death":

According to his sister, Rosa, Agnon was particularly close to his mother. The portraits of sick women in his writings were inspired by her. Esther Czaczkes was ill when he was a child; she would send him on errands as she was sometimes too weak to go out. She suffered from a heart ailment to which she succumbed in her early forties. During much of her son's childhood and youth, she was, apparently, a semi-invalid. Her illness forced young Czaczkes to assume greater emotional and practical responsibilities—particularly as he was the first-born—than young children usually bear. She encouraged his literary ambitions, introducing him to the classics in world literature, stimulating him to become an artist.

Not surprisingly, the next paragraph links Agnon to Lawrence and Hirshl, the

protagonist of "A Simple Tale," with the Paul Morel of *Sons and Lovers*.

What biography cannot fully explain, a book like W. R. B. Fairbairn's *Psycho-Analytic Studies of the Personality* can:

In the transitional phase, according to Fairbairn, the child has a split view of the mother—insofar as she is loved, she is "an accepted object," and insofar as she is hated, she is a "reversed object." Mature dependence involves the abdication of this dichotomous view, and immature dependence, the preservation of this attitude in later life. . . . Seen from this viewpoint, pairs of women in Agnon's work—such as Blumah and Mina, Shifra and Sonia, Shirah and Henrietta—might be treated by the hero as two sides of one person.

The result is criticism of the plodding sort. That Agnon lived a remarkably Kafkaesque life, that he was a difficult, deeply disturbed man are, no doubt, true. But what matters is the subtle fiction he left behind, and about that Aberbach delivers precious little Agnon's readers did not already know.

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