

## THE KAFKA-AGNON POLARITIES

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The comparison of Kafka with other writers of the modern period has become such a beaten path in Kafkaland that one often shudders upon encountering another "Kafka and..." study. Despite this academic ennui, we should, nevertheless, discriminate between comparisons that are gratuitous and those that are grounded and illuminating. In referring to the Kafka-Agnon polarities, I am attempting to avoid the tedious "Kafka and..." formula while calling attention to an area of research virtually unknown in Kafkaist circles since it is mainly written in Hebrew, but is, nevertheless, potentially rewarding.

The attribution of a certain strain in Agnon's writing to the influence of Franz Kafka first appeared in the early 1930's. In 1932, Agnon, who had recently solidified his reputation as a modern version of the traditional Jewish teller of pious tales in a four-volume Berlin edition of his collected works, published a startling new cluster of five stories, titled enigmatically *Sefer HaMa'asim* (*The Book of Tales*) which dismayed and confused his readers. They found them impenetrable since they suspended the realistic canons of time, space, and causality in ways which even his most fantastic quasi-Hasidic tales did not do. Several critics who knew both German literature well and the extent of Agnon's library smiled and declared: "He's been reading Kafka," and their articles referred to influences rather than comparisons or contrasts.

Though Kafka was by no means a well-known writer in the early 1930's, certainly not one of the unavoidable prooftexts he is today, the attribution was logical—given the literary situation in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. By the late twenties and early thirties, there had formed in those two cities a veritable colony of sophisticated German-reading émigrés, many from Berlin and Prague, some of them Kafka's close associates. Hugo Bergmann, for instance, came in 1920; Leo Hermann, the editor of *Selbstwehr*, in 1926; Max Brod and the two Weltsches arrived in 1939 and 1940. Together with such luminaries as Gershom Scholem who came in 1923 and Martin Buber, who came in 1933, they formed one of the first

centers of Kafka enthusiasts. Their personal libraries and those of hundreds of other intellectuals, all refugees from German-speaking centers, contained at least the three novels, published in the late twenties, some of the short stories, and, if they left after the Anschluss or Kristallnacht, the first edition of *Gesammelte Werke*, 1936-37.

Agnon, though an Ost-Jude, was part of this circle since he had spent 11 years (1913-24) in Germany, was an Austrian citizen (since he came from Galicia), and shrewdly capitalized on the romanticization of the Ost-Jude which begins to surface in Germany in the first decade of the century and is manifest in such periodicals as *Der Jude* (edited by Martin Buber from 1917-1929) and several popular anthologies of the period where Agnon had published translations of his early Hebrew scripts. While Agnon protested that he had never read Kafka except for *Der Verwandlung*, he probably did. It is also probable that Kafka, at least in his later years, read some of Agnon's tales of Eastern European Jewry since he became deeply interested in that world, particularly in Bratslav Tales which, interestingly enough, Agnon admitted were one of the formative influences in his writing career. I cite these biographical facts—as I will cite others—not to prove influence, but rather to establish common contacts, partial “grounds for comparison.”

Once coined, the Agnon-Kafka nexus became common currency in Hebrew literary criticism and circulated unexamined and unspecified. It was reaffirmed forcefully by the prestigious critic, Baruch Kurzweil (also a Prague Jew), in the 1950's and 1960's; Kurzweil wrote extensively on Agnon and, in arguing that religious doubt lurks under the deceptively pious surface of Agnon's prose, compared him repeatedly to other modern writers such as Kafka, Musil, and Joyce. Kurzweil correctly noted the obvious fact that while Kafka was only marginal to the Jewish tradition, Agnon was fully in the tradition (despite all his doubts), and herein lay the difference. While placing the two writers in the same modernist tradition, Kurzweil essentially constricted and subverted the grounds for comparison.

Kurzweil's criticism, in general, was theologically oriented and deliberately avoided literary history. In my own work on Agnon, which, for the first time, set Agnon in his historical milieu, I demonstrated, for instance, that Agnon had in fact written a story in Yiddish in 1907 with the intriguing name “Totem-tants,” which manifested many of the calculated indeterminacies of Kafka's mature style, and that Agnon had read widely in neo-Romantic German and Scandinavian authors during his adolescence in Galicia. When one observes both writers from the perspective of general literary history, the comparison is far from gratuitous: both were born in the 1880's (Kafka 1883, Agnon 1888) and reared in

the homes of relatively successful businessmen (both in marketing) in the last decades of the Hapsburg Empire. While Kafka's Prague was far more westernized than Agnon's Buczacz, connections of the latter with Lemberg and Vienna were well established; the latest newspapers and books were available and political life was intense. If one were to compare the news of the Jewish world published in *Selbstwehr*, the Zionist weekly whose centrality in Kafka's life has been well established by Hartmut Binder, with the Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers which Agnon was reading (and in which he published) one finds a remarkable commonality of content and concern: reports of Zionist activities, the settlement of Palestine, antisemitism as in reports of pogroms in Russia, blood libels throughout all of eastern Europe, and, between 1911-13, the Beiliss Trial which reopened the wounds of the Dreyfus Affair which had hardly healed. The availability of relatively inexpensive newsprint and improved communication are technological advances which contributed mightily to the formation of an international sense of Jewish solidarity: the death of Herzl or the Kishinev pogrom were widely covered and the news was immediately available in Jewish homes everywhere. Kafka's diaries, Evelyn Beck's study of his interest in the Yiddish theatre, my own research into the impact of the Beiliss Trial and, more recently, the perceptive psychoanalytic of study Marthe Robert, or Ronald Hayman's biography on Kafka's obsession with trials and judgments, are adequate proof of his deep interest, even obsession with Jewish affairs. Kafka often talked of settling in Palestine, but was characteristically incapable of making such a radical move. Agnon, on the other hand, did make a move and resided in Jaffa and Jerusalem between 1908 and 1913.

During Agnon's stay in Germany between 1913 and 1924, mostly in Berlin, but also in Leipzig, Frankfurt and Bad-Homburg, the intellectual circles of our two writers actually intersected in some places. Agnon probably read *Der Verwandlung* during this period and it is inconceivable that Kafka did not come across the name of Agnon since the latter was very popular in the circle of German Jews who were Zionists and disposed to harbor a strange nostalgia for anything that smacked of Ostjudentum, as manifested in Buber's *Der Jude* which certainly reached Kafka who published "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" in it in 1917. Agnon published six stories between 1917-24, several translated from the Hebrew manuscript by Gershom Scholem (no less!) and one, "Agadat HaSofer" ("Die Erzählung vom Toraschreiber") appeared in the same volume, though not in the same issue, as "Ein Bericht...." Agnon also published stories in three anthologies which were very popular in the same circles: 1. *Chad Gadja: Das Pesachbuch*, ed. Hugo Hermann. Berlin, 1914. 2. *Treue: Ein Jüdisches Sammelsschrift*, ed. Loe Hermann. Berlin,

1915. 3. *Das Buch von den Polnischen Juden*, ed. S.J. Agnon and A. Eliasberg. Sensitized to the ethos of what—perhaps in polite language—was being called “Polish Jewry” by his encounters with Izak Loewy and his Yiddish troupe, or Mordecai Georg Langer, Kafka would have seen in Agnon the modern incarnation of the classical Hasidic storyteller. Kafka might also have read Agnon’s novella *Vehaya He’akov Lemishor* (*Und das Krumme wird gerade*) published first in 1918, but twice republished after Kafka’s death. This was one of the most popular books in those German-Jewish circles which Kafka frequented. Ironically, Agnon, the leading Hebrew prose writer of the twentieth century, was first more appreciated in German translation than in the Hebrew originals.

With the historical grounds for comparison firmly established, we can define the areas worthy of comparison and subject them to critical scrutiny. Before doing so, we should refer to the Hebrew study by Hillel Barzel (1972) which is totally dedicated to a comparative study of Agnon and Kafka (actually the name of the book) and more or less represents the state of the field. Other Hebrew critics, such as G. Shaked of the Hebrew University have recently offered seminar courses on this topic, but since they have not yet published anything on this matter, we cannot address ourselves to them.

Barzel unfortunately follows his predecessor in the chair at Bar-Ilan University, Baruch Kurzweil, and persists in emphasizing the theological/metaphysical motif as the main message of both writers, a position which few would subscribe to today. All aspects of these writers are then assayed with this touchstone. Barzel thus finds Agnon more religious, open to possibilities of redemption, and clearly rooted in the Jewish tradition. Kafka is therefore metaphysical but secular, monothematic, closed to all possibility of redemption, particularly since he can find no refuge in home or family, usually areas of security—or at least, struggle—in Agnon’s fiction. While Barzel finds both writers masters of allegory and symbol (not fully explained), or of a subtle mixture of the comic and the tragic, Agnon always seems to possess the wider range. After over 100 pages of equally vacuous comparisons, Barzel spends some 200 pages (eight chapters) comparing works, or parts of them under a variety of rubrics: similar similes, the use of archetypes, authorial presence, the wandering Jew, the concept of the artist, etc. Here, it must be said, that Barzel is saved by the presence of the texts and that his insights, though limited by his initial concept, are at times interesting. It is, for instance, illuminating, to compare “Agadat HaSofer” with “Ein Hungerkünstler” under the rubric “the concept of art,” but this assumes that this is the only interpretation of the two stories or that they are comparable to begin with—a contention which is never established. I cite Barzel’s difficulty as

emblematic of the problems of such a comparative study: the enormity of the subject, the narrow, inflexible method, and the apologetic desire to demonstrate that Agnon is in the same league with Kafka combined to subvert Barzel's study. What I hope to do in the remainder of this paper is more modest: I would like to establish some guidelines for research in this area by defining what is possible and productive.

What, we should ask, are the perimeters of our investigation? Do we compare—or contrast—all of Agnon with all of Kafka? Obviously this is impossible, not only because of the limitations of time and interest, but because much of Agnon bears no resemblance whatsoever to Kafka's normative mode of expression—assuming we can agree upon such a stylistic phenomenon. Even if we were to go beyond the twenty-odd stories of "Sefer HaMa'asim" (ordinarily recognized as "Kafkaesque") to include such formidable pieces as "Shevu'at Emunim," "Ido ve'Enam," "Ad Olam," "Hadam ve'Khiseh," and the "Kelev Meshuga" ("Mad Dog") portions of the novel *Temol Shilshom*, altogether some 600 pages of dense fiction, we would still be left with several thousands pages of stories, novels, quasi-historical compilations of tales, collections of rewritten customs interlarded with anecdotes, eulogies, commemorative pieces, etc., etc. Not only Agnon lived twice as long as Kafka, but he happened to spend most of his adult life in Jerusalem, a city with specific implications for a Hebrew writer, not only in its historical resonances, but in that it was the vital center of the Jewish world in one of the most dynamic periods in Jewish history. One simply could not escape into one's burrow—however one may want to interpret that metonym. This does not mean that Agnon was a better or a worse writer, but rather one who was more vulnerable to the pressures of overwhelming historical forces. When we speak of Agnon's resemblance to Kafka, we are actually referring to about ten per cent of the former's work. Once the perimeters have been established, we should turn to the all important questions of language and thematics which are often intertwined. To focus on these problems, we turn to two stories, one by each writer, both written in 1912—not that these stories have much in common, but that each, in its own way, was crucial in the artistic development of the author: Kafka's *Das Urteil* and Agnon's *Vehaya He'akov Lemishor*, (*And the Crooked Shall Become Straight*), the same story which was so popular in its German translation of 1918, *Und das Krumme wird gerade*. In each case, the story represents an artistic "breakthrough"—to use Politzer's term, a breakthrough from fragments and experimentation to a sudden mastery involving decisions regarding stylistic and thematic features which subsequently mark the author's work for the rest of his career.

In that *Das Urteil* is well known to Kafkaists, I can be brief. It was,

according to Kafka's testimony, written in the night of September 22-3, 1912, and deals with the clash between a son, Georg Bendemann, and his seemingly ailing, aged father, who, by the end of the story, condemns his son to death by drowning. Bound by this injunction ("Urteil"), Georg jumps off the bridge near their apartment. In this story we already find the seemingly lucid sentence which, upon examination, is often indeterminate, the obsession with guilt and trials, the subject-object inversion, the varied and often contrary identifications, and the unique fusion of disparate experiences which are characteristic features of Kafka's art.

Politzer has attributed the force of the breakthrough to Kafka's meeting with Felice Bauer. Finding this attribution inadequate, I have suggested elsewhere that many of the specifics of the story become more integrated when we understand that Kafka organized his story around a nuclear concept which could hold together disparate, centrifugal elements. Here as in some Kafka's other well integrated stories, a central, generalized concept is presented as the title and the narrative is a taut examination of the term, situation by situation. The term may have several mutually contradictory meanings and the story is then a narrative concretization of the frustrating yet exhilarating complexities of language. I have traced the term *Urteil* to both the Beiliss Trial (1911-1913) and the Jewish High Holiday Prayer Book. Echoes of Rosh HaShanah or Yom Kippur service illuminate the process of judgment, the figure of the father or of all systems of authority which, by their very nature, must fail, despite their oppressiveness. In the service, as exemplified in the "Unetaneh Tokef" prayer where the term "Urteil" is in a dramatic, key position, the divinity addressed has the personality traits of Georg Bendemann's father (or Hermann Kafka as portrayed in the famous "Brief an der Vater"): the domineering king and judge of the world— yet addressed by "Du," the source of all authority and thus of guilt, the all-seeing eye form which we can never hide, the unquestioned power which controls man's destiny. Echoes of the Beiliss enrich the figure of the friend in Russia, the lonely failure pitied by Georg yet to whom he feels accountable, the exiled person with whom the father has an enigmatic relationship and whose fall seems to threaten the newly won security of Georg both in business and in love. Given Kafka's family background and his recently rekindled Jewish consciousness (as demonstrated by Evelyn Beck) an event so central to the consciousness of Prague Jewry could not have left him unaffected. Identification with Mendel Beiliss, or even a remote though prolonged observation of his plight, could have provided Kafka with the necessary validation of his own feelings of insecurity and loneliness, an expansion and objectification of his Oedipal torment, corroboration of his doubts about the validity and viability of language, and a moral justification for

the bewildering dialectic between self-corrosive guilt and subtle imposture which marks so many of his protagonists. *Der Verwandlung*, a further development of these themes, we should recall, was written several weeks later, in November, 1912.

All the features mentioned above are the product of deliberate artistic choices: the tight, Flaubertian style which leaves nothing to chance; the plot strategies which take the reader from an apparently orderly bourgeois setting into the abyss which lurks beneath it; in all, a departure from the limitations of realistic prose writing. Agnon, at the same time, made several decisions concerning his craft—which he cultivated with the same intensity as Kafka—that took him in a somewhat different direction. Though six years younger than Kafka, Agnon published about 70 pieces in Yiddish and Hebrew, both in Buczacz and Jaffa, before writing *Vehaya He'Akov Lemishor*. Most of these were, to be sure, embarrassingly clumsy and were published only because the editor of a provincial newspaper often has to fill space. Those published in Jaffa attest to experiments in more serious writing, usually macabre neo-romantic tales of frustrated love, bizarre deaths, strange women—all conveyed in an agitated, often lush Hebrew prose style. Agnon, himself, obviously realized that this was not the medium he was seeking since, after the success of *Vehaya He'Akov Lemishor*—written, according to his testimony in only four days, though it covers some 80 pages—he scrapped most of what he had written previously and either rewrote or totally discarded every line he had previously published. Few of these 70 items were ever published in the many collections of his works.

Instead of paring down contemporary prose style to the threshold of meaning, Agnon adopted the late rabbinic style his great grandfather might have used, but kept it under a scrupulously tight control. The lexical, morphological, and phrasing features are clearly late rabbinic; the sentence, however, is carefully measured and modern in its stratagems. Agnon could thus generate the tension he sought between historical linguistic resonance (so important in an ancient, text-oriented culture), and a controlled reticence which often conceals more than it tells. The sensitive reader is thus forced to share the implied author's ambivalence about the world he has chosen to describe.

The technique worked wonders in *Vehaya He'Akov Lemishor*, a tale set in mid-nineteenth century Galicia where the norms of traditional piety and the bourgeois ethos are subtly at odds. The hero, Menashe Hayyim, a pious shopkeeper of some means, is forced into bankruptcy by a new competitor. To recoup his capital, he reluctantly takes to the road as an itinerant beggar armed with a letter of recommendation certifying his identity, his former position in society, and his rectitude. This seemingly

bizarre technique for recovering lost capital was both common in earlier centuries, but had become the butt of satire by the nineteenth century. By using this ambiguous style, Agnon does not allow the reader to know what the author thinks about it since he wants to defuse this social issue. Menashe Hayyim's humiliating enterprise achieves its goal—at first: he does recoup enough capital to return home and reopen a business. Unfortunately, once he thinks his fate has turned, he succumbs to temptation by selling his letter to another beggar. As one might anticipate, he then loses his money and all his possessions at an inn during a country fair with its grotesque side-shows and gluttony and must return to the road to beg, sans letter of recommendation. The beggar who bought the letter naturally dies and is buried as Menashe Hayyim; the latter's wife, now a widow, remarries and bears children. When Menashe Hayyim finally does return home, he discovers his wife married and a mother. Herein lies the moral problem of the Novella: according to Jewish law, he should reveal that he is alive, thus embarrassing his wife and condemning her child to bastardy; but since he loves his wife, a bourgeois-romantic sentiment, he leaves town beset by the guilt of his concealment. To prevent disclosure, he often hides in forests and becomes a denizen of cemeteries. One day he noticed the cemetery guard engraving a handsome tombstone with the name "Menashe Hayyim" on it. The guard told him it was ordered by a lady for the grave of a certain beggar, her husband. Realizing that it was his wife, Krendel Tcharni, who had ordered the stone for him since she thought him dead, Menashe Hayyim finally confessed the story of his life to the guard. Several days later, happy in thought that his wife still loved him and that he had resisted to reveal the truth, thereby ruining her life, Menashe Hayyim dies and the guard places over his grave the stone ordered by his wife for the other grave which she thought was his. Though childless, his name was not forgotten because his wife would come to weep over his grave.

Even in bad plot-outline, this Novella does not sound like the pious tale it was taken to be by most critics for over 30 years: the quasi-rabbinic style, the pious milieu, succeeded in deflecting the reader from such obvious points as the loss of identity and the descent into hell, let alone the ambiguous ending in the graveyard. Kurzweil noticed in the late 1950's that there are, indeed, many discordant elements in the story, but following his theological bias, reads this story and much of modern Hebrew literature as a literary manifestation of secularism. The story, for him, implies an accusation against the cruelty of God who lets Menashe Hayyim descend into a world chaos for no glaring sin, if any at all. The hero is forced to leave his home and wife, to depart on a journey from which there is no return, since his return can be effected only by a miracle.



But there are no miracles today. Some fifteen years later I argued that Kurzweil, as usual, never addressed himself to the totality of the study, to the title which (taken from Isaiah, 40) implies that "crooked is made straight" and to the ending, which definitely vindicates the hero and restores the reader's confidence in the possibility of justice in this world. Menashe Hayyim does die happy in the knowledge that he has withstood temptation (to reveal his true identity: that he was still alive) and has been rewarded with the two gifts most important to him, after he had despaired of ever recouping his fortune and his status, i.e., assurance of his wife's continuing love for him, and confidence that he would have his posterity even if it were merely his name on a tombstone.

Today I would extend my argument further. While it is undeniable that Agnon was interested in a popular tale which he probably had read or heard, and delighted in entertaining his audience with what seemed to be a pious tale, he made several deliberate decisions which imply a conscious sense of direction and lead us to certain conclusions concerning his attitude towards his craft.

1. After four years of experimentation in a neo-romantic style with themes taken from the world of Jaffa where he lived, he abandoned both his stylistic and thematic course. He obviously realized that this direction did not afford him the opportunities to exploit his prodigious knowledge of Hebrew or confront the cultural problems which obsessed him. Ultimately, these Jaffa stories were frivolous, and remained so until recast in his new style. (Many, as said, were never recast, but merely discarded.)

2. He chose both a theme and style which were patently not the norm of fiction then being written in Hebrew.

3. He mixed features of the pious tale with points familiar to the German Romantic tradition and the bourgeois novel.

4. He adopted a manneristic, late-rabbinic style for a Novella which has many passages of bourgeois and psychological realism.

Here the contrast with Kafka is instructive. Kafka selected situations which were, to him, either intolerable, or absurd, or comically grotesque, and struggled to fashion an unmediated linguistic medium which, while contemporary, teetered on the threshold of human consciousness. Agnon's style beginning with *Vehaya He'Akov Lemishor* immediately directs the reader to a world of texts and textuality, a specific textuality at that, one that embodies in all its features a traditional, recognizable milieu. Briefly, no competent reader of Hebrew could conceivably miss the multifarious implications of this style. Realizing that he could not fashion a neutral text, "free" of referentiality to previous texts—for such is the nature of the Hebrew language in the beginning of the century and, to a lesser degree, even today—Agnon fashioned an

artful pastiche of an older style so convincing that it took most readers some thirty years to realize that under the pious text of the Novella lay a sub-text which qualified, ironized, or even subverted the text. Though criticized by such formidable figures as Berdiczewski and S. Tsemah, Agnon succeeded admirably in creating a voice which allows for a wide range of authorial attitudes towards the text and the situations created, a subtle modulation between authorial and narrative voice, hence the possibility of a variety of unreliable narrators. Applied to those stories which most closely resemble those of Kafka, the manneristic style adds another level of indeterminacy. If one, furthermore, were to speak of Kafka and Agnon in terms of self-referentiality, one could say that Kafka creates the space for "play" by precluding clear signification of the represented world, while Agnon creates space for "play" by precluding clear signification of the textual world. While, on the surface, the texture—particularly in translation—may seem to be the same, it is totally different.

In sum, while the worlds of Kafka and Agnon overlap in fiction as they did in actual life, extreme caution must be exercised in making comparisons. The question hinges not upon whether Agnon read *Der Verwandlung* or both read Nahman of Bratslav, but rather upon the specific nature of the texts they produced. For a quick proof of my argument, I suggest a simple test: read the modern Hebrew translation of a Kafka passage and you get a Hebrew approximation of Kafka, similar to the English approximations of Kafka you get in the English translation. Read, however, a translation of the same passage into Agnon's manneristic, late-rabbinic Hebrew, and you produce an entirely different reader's response. It is no longer an approximation of Kafka, but distinctively an Agnonic text.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A. J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the fiction of S. J. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn T. Beck, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theatre* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Band, "Kafka and the Beiliss Affair," *Comparative Literature*, 32/2 (Spring, 1980), pp.168-183.

<sup>4</sup> Marthe Robert, *Seul, comme Franz Kafka* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Hayman, *K: A Biography of Franz Kafka* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Hillel Barzel, *Agnon ve-Kafka* (Tel Aviv, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> See note 3.