

## THE IRONIC IMAGINATION

### **A Reading of S. Y. Agnon's "Soil of the Land of Israel"**

Samuel Leiter

THE THEME OF a short story may usually be distilled to simple statements: "Love transforms the beloved," for example, or "The Land of Israel is the source of spiritual strength." But to sum up the meaning of Agnon's "Soil of the Land of Israel" solely in its theme of exile is to reduce it to a platitude. Consequently, the only way to discern what the story means to say is to examine *how* it is said, *how* it is woven into the design of style, image and narrative technique. In order to explore the subtle and complex quality of Agnon's moral vision, to perceive its personality, the reader must experience it as it has been embodied organically in the concrete and formal pattern of this specific story.

#### *the polarity of zion and exile*

TWO MEN ARE INTRODUCED in the opening sentence—the narrator who *went down* (*yarad*) to the Diaspora and the gravekeeper who has not *gone up* (*alah*) to Zion. These two movements are natural metaphors of change in condition. To go down is to descend, to decline, to degenerate; to go up is to ascend, to rise, to improve. Moreover, in the mythic habit of Agnon's mind, the destinations of the two movements are introduced to complicate and deepen the symbolic directions. Hence, to go down from the Land of Israel is to descend to the graveyard; to go up to Zion is to enter the precincts of eternal life.

Agnon has elaborated these thematic equations of Zion-life and Exile-

---

*Dr. Leiter teaches Modern Hebrew Literature and Midrash at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. His critical essay on The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself appeared in the Fall 1965 issue of Conservative Judaism. In this study of 'Afar Eretz Yisrael by the Nobel Laureate S. Y. Agnon (Eilu V'eilu, Jerusalem: Schocken, 1964, pp. 278-289) the passages quoted in English are excerpted from the unpublished translation by Jules Harlow.*

death in his tale *In the Heart of the Seas*. The stark polarity of ascent in that tale carries ancillary connotations as well. Pilgrims going up to the Land of Israel ascend to life. Exile symbolizes purposelessness or vanity in addition to descent and death. Thus in chapter five, "Ascent and Descent" (*Aliyah Vi-yeridah*), the pilgrims have shunned the temptation of a fair (*yerid*). Rather than avail themselves of the opportunity to make a quick profit which, Satan assures them, will succor them on their perilous journey, they continue on a straight course. The fair, in which we discern the allegorical aspect of Vanity Fair, represents decline, whereas their constancy and sense of purpose on their pilgrimage is spiritual ascent. This is summed up in the pious boast of one of the pilgrims: "Every one is in a state of *yeridah* (descent), but we are in a state of *aliyah* (ascent)."

Agnon also pursues these aspects of spiritual ascent and descent in "Soil of the Land of Israel." The story opens with a catalogue of the many ill-starred ventures that brought about the decline of the gravekeeper, thus deepening and broadening the thematic equation to include lack of purpose and a feeble sense of reality in the concept of Exile. Thus, Exile=descent=death=Vanity Fair. The hero-narrator of the story then describes his visit to the cemetery as he expands on the tragedy of Israelites in the unclean, polluted Exile, bewailing those who die a double death far from the land of resurrection. The narrator, who can ascend to the Land of Israel, functions in his own eyes as a free man. He envisions the helpless gravekeeper, on the other hand, in bondage and frustration, doomed to his mean existence in the Diaspora.

Agnon's preoccupation with Exile-death has gothic overtones and often borders on the macabre. Baruch Kurzweil has demonstrated<sup>1</sup> that Agnon's story "The Lady and the Peddler," based on the vampire motif, can be read as an allegory of Israel's destiny in the Exile. The useful Jewish peddler is Israel among the nations. The vampire noblewoman is the gentile world that fattens the Jew in order to suck his blood. Dov Sadan has examined<sup>2</sup> the graveyard motif at length in discussing "The Canopy of Love," showing the moral of that story to be: Israel's home in the Diaspora is but the grave.

Although nostalgia for his childhood world of the Diaspora abounds in Agnon's stories, it never slips into sentimentality, for in his stories

---

<sup>1</sup> Baruch Kurzweil, *Essays on the Stories of S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1962), pp. 123-129. See also Hillel Barzel, "Between Agnon and Kafka," *Carmelit* (Haifa, 1966), pp. 174-183.

<sup>2</sup> Dov Sadan, "Between House and Grave," *L'Agnon Shai* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 185-216.

the beauty of the past, the comprehensive reconstruction of the old Jewish world, is unmistakably post-mortem. Agnon's nostalgia is tempered by irony, giving it a calculated objectivity. The maudlin and the morbid are the objects, not the means, of his perception. The necrophilic gravekeeper in "The Canopy of Love," whose eerie wedding is performed in the grave, exemplifies Agnon's view of Jewish obsession with the past that is beautiful but dead. Agnon—as distinct from the narrator who is to be regarded merely as one of his personae—views that past with less passion and with more detachment. By virtue of his intellectual wit he is simultaneously tradition's orphan, mourning his loss, and its coroner, analyzing the cause of its death, a double perspective that complicates and enriches the meaning of the story.

The special ironic temper of "Soil of the Land of Israel" is pointed up by comparison with "Nor Go Astray" (*V'lo Nikashel*), a traditional tale, modest in psychological complication. A young woman who specializes in the history and versions of prayers disputes the narrator's version of the grace after meals. She contends that there is no basis for his version of the third benediction, "so that we be neither disappointed nor shamed nor go astray." The narrator-hero, although he has recited this phrase "nor go astray" as part of the benediction since childhood, is unable to find it in his large collection of prayerbooks. The lady scholar subsequently leaves Palestine to pursue her studies in Germany. After several years the narrator acquires a prayerbook in which he finds the phrase "nor go astray." He underlines it and mails it to her. By happy coincidence it reaches her as she is trying to decide whether or not to marry a young German. The timely arrival of the prayerbook from Zion with the underlined prayer "nor go astray" saves her from marrying a non-Jew. Eventually she returns to Jerusalem, marries a Jew and lives happily ever after.

It is a simple tale whose theme echoes the traditional doctrine of the polarity of Zion and Exile, or more precisely, the centrality of Zion in relation to the peripheral Exile. This polarity is a dominant concern in Agnon's writing. In many stories (such as "An Emissary from the Land of Israel," "Tale of a Goat," "A Lodger for the Night") his fiction is structured in a mythic world. Zion is holy; it is the fulcrum of creation and the world-navel. Space is a heterogeneous structure, even as time is. Space is not a level continuum of places that merge with one another, but a well defined hierarchy of discrete entities, each assuming its unique capacity to heighten reality as it moves towards the deeper reality of Zion.

### *the uses of irony*

"SOIL OF THE Land of Israel" is a more complicated story, in many respects. The tale of coincidence and good fortune, of the package of soil from Zion whose timely arrival saves all, observes the neat pieties of "Nor Go Astray." By various ironic techniques, however, Agnon indicates an entirely different attitude to the theme. The story is a structure of intricate ironies. Since the disintegration of the religious vision of the world has relativized all values, modern man is acutely aware of alternatives to traditional commitments. A tolerant, self-inclusive irony allows Agnon to explore the old values with detachment, to shape a complex, often ambivalent, yet harmonious response to the multiplicity of conflicting attitudes. His irony is an open, perceptive way to consider the value of a culture that is no longer absolute and to establish his moral perspective on the broad base of an experience which does not confine itself to traditional attitudes.<sup>3</sup> In order to discern the real thematic pattern that underlies the surface of the story, we must therefore study Agnon's ironic techniques and interpret the values that control them.

### *the irony of allusion*

THERE IS A BASIC paradox in Agnon's style. Since its diction and syntax are traditional, while at the same time the imagination which shapes it is distinctly modern, the style is able to operate simultaneously in different modes. Agnon has developed the rhetoric of allusion into an instrument of fine metaphysical wit. His allusions are often deflections of words or images which his modern sensibility has moved out of alignment with their literary antecedents, resulting in a subtle irony that adds a complex, ambiguous and dynamic meaning to his story. The struggle between the traditional source and the contemporary analogue adds tension and resonance to the style. Agnon's allusions are never caged references. They are untamed echoes that reverberate with connotation, and function critically as ironic metaphor. Their constant presence emphasizes the discrepancy of values between the old traditional Jewish world and the secularized modern world. Since the correspondences between the two worlds obtain mainly in the sentimentality which has become part of the national ethos, Agnon's ironic style traces the stitches

---

3 See William Van O'Connor, *Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry* (New York, 1964), pp. 123-142; Albert Cook, *The Meaning of Fiction* (Detroit, 1960), pp. 38-63; Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (New York, 1965), pp. 36-38; S. L. Goldberg, *The Classical Temper, A Study of James Joyce's ULYSSES* (New York, 1961), pp. 100-144.

of that sentimentality, ripping and tearing as it goes, exposing the nakedness, the shame and the anguish of the modern Jew.

Moreover, Agnon does more than adapt single words or phrases to the sensibility of modern fiction. He uses structural allusion to a great extent, turning his sources into architectonic and thematic models which he follows closely. He modifies the pattern for the needs of his story or the exigencies of his ironic vision. Thus older forms—paradigms, parables and epigrams<sup>4</sup>—are integrated into modern short stories and novels, just as older elements of style are integrated into a personal idiom. Although these forms and elements have been recast in Agnon's imagination, they retain by some process of genetic integrity an irreducible residuum of original genres and meanings which glows within. The genres have been transposed to a new mode and have been transformed in tone and purpose, but they also have preserved the structural character of their original mode. In this story we shall see how Agnon uses this tension for his ironic purposes, as a counterpoint that ultimately gives his work the deeper perspective of great literature. In this sense we can study Agnon as an ironic fabulist of decay, who subtly develops below the surfaces of traditional and mythic alienation—the theme of "Soil of the Land of Israel"—an intense and peculiarly modern disorientation that sounds all the inflections of perplexity. For although this story is not a mere dramatization of modern theological abstractions nor a parable for modern man, its preoccupation is identical with the main concern of religion: the depths of man's limited condition, or exile.

At the end of the first chapter the theme is symbolically advanced in a dialogue, structured after a talmudic paradigm which illustrates the Rabbinic doctrine of suffering. It is an excellent example of Agnon's allusive use of the paradigm form as part of his ironic perspective. The talmudic passage follows:

*Rabbi Eleazar fell sick and Rabbi Johanan went to visit him. He noticed that Rabbi Eleazar was lying in a dark room, and he bared his own arm and light radiated from it. Thereupon he noticed that Rabbi Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him, "Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we learnt: the one who sacrifices much and the one who sacrifices little have the same merit, provided the heart is directed to heaven. Is it perhaps lack of sustenance? Not everyone has*

---

<sup>4</sup> On older, popular forms see Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition To Gospel* (London, 1934).

the privilege of enjoying two tables. Is it because of (the lack of) children? *This is the bone of my tenth son!*" Rabbi Eleazar replied to him, "I am weeping on account of this beauty (i.e. Rabbi Johanan's) that is going to rot in the earth." He said to him, "On that account you surely have reason to weep." And they both wept. *Rabbi Johanan said to him, "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" He replied, "Neither they nor their reward." He said to him, "Give me your hand." And he gave him his hand and he raised him.*<sup>5</sup> (Emphasis added)

Agnon's abbreviated dialogue in "Soil of the Land of Israel" runs like this:

*I said to him, "Why do you sigh? Is it because of some good which you have not enjoyed? Not everyone has that privilege. Is it because of your children who were taken to the army? They will soon return." He replied to me, "I feel pained on account of that man (i.e. himself) who was not privileged to go up to the Land of Israel." I said to him, "On that account you surely have reason to feel pained." And we both sighed.*

The most obvious, as well as the most significant, change in the narrator's version is "on account of that man who was not privileged to go up to the Land of Israel," which is the equivalent of "on account of this beauty that is going to rot in the earth." This version is quite likely influenced by the remark of the Maharsha<sup>6</sup> in his comment on the passage: "It does not appear that they suffered because of Rabbi Johanan's beauty alone; perhaps they suffered because of the remembrance of the destruction of Jerusalem." The fatal variant of beauty and death in the narrator's account identifies Israel's status in the Exile with death.

### ***the irony of author-versus-narrator***

EVER SINCE the modern author removed himself from the story and stopped commenting on the acts of his characters and explicitly judging them, ambiguity and caution have become part of the reading experience. We are not always sure how the author means us to take the story, we have to decide for ourselves whether the fictional narrator in

---

5 *Berakhot* 5b. Translated by Maurice Simon. This talmudic story is also the pattern for the end of Agnon's second chapter where the parallel to the passage from *Berakhot* is extended: "Were it not for the clerk hindering, the poor fellow would be rejoicing over his soil and would accept his suffering with love."

6 Rabbi Samuel Edels, talmudic commentator of sixteenth-seventeenth century Poland.

whose mouth the author has placed the story is reliable or whether he is a liar, a fool or a madman. Wayne Booth has discussed<sup>7</sup> types of narration, reliable and unreliable narrators, and distance, as aspects of the author's voice in fiction, and the dangers inherent in impersonal narration. Critical controversies still rage over Henry James' attitude to *The Turn of the Screw* and James Joyce's attitude to *Ulysses*, with every possible position attributed to the authors, from total repudiation of the narrator's vision of his world to complete identification. Much of Agnon's writing raises the same problem of distinguishing between the point of view of the fictional narrator and that of the author. Here another ambiguity is provided which the author may use for ironic purposes.

The smug and sanctimonious narrator of our story envisions himself as Rabbi Johanan, coming to save a suffering Rabbi Eleazar who sits in darkness. He is thus the saint of legend who heals the sick and succors the exiled, for he comes from Zion, the source of all healing. Soon he will be the knight-errant, setting off on his quest for the handful of soil to send to the moribund gravekeeper. He conceives of his behavior in the two main forms that Northrop Frye finds in Romance: "a secular form dealing with chivalry and knight-errantry, and a religious form devoted to legends of saints."<sup>8</sup>

But Agnon as author reads the paradigm in a different fashion. In Aristotelian terms, he is the *ieron* to the narrator's boastful *alazon*.<sup>9</sup> The narrator has suppressed the key talmudic line, in which the suffering Rabbi Eleazar weeps not for himself but for Rabbi Johanan; Agnon the author develops the censored line into the central dramatic irony of the story.<sup>10</sup> The narrator of our story is conscious of the talmudic parallel to his conduct. He changes Rabbi Eleazar's lament over the inevitable limitations of the savior's (Rabbi Johanan's) condition into the gravekeeper's personal lament over his own destiny, thus preserving his own role as savior. Agnon, however, sees the narrator as victim. To Agnon the gravekeeper is merely a "type," his exile a prefiguration of the deeper

---

7 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago & London, 1963), pp. 311-374.

8 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York, 1966), p. 34.

9 William Van O'Connor *op. cit.* p. 137: ". . . the *ieron*, a stock character of early Greek drama from whom our word 'irony' derives. *Eiron*, an underdog, was set against *alazon*, a boastful character greatly given to exaggeration." Frye writes of the *ieron* (p. 40) ". . . he is a predestined artist just as the *alazon* is one of his predestined victims."

10 See my article, "The Vision of the Fallen House," *Midstream*, February 1967, for another instance of Agnon's method of concealing the meaning of a story in a phrase which has been omitted from the allusion given.

exile of the narrator. The condescending narrator is ignorant of his own condition; he does not know the real state of affairs.

On this irony Agnon builds the story. The narrator who purports to exercise the thaumaturgic powers of Zion cannot be conceived by the author in those terms, because it is for the destruction of Zion that one should cry. The symbolic pattern of allusion deflates the narrator's pose. Jerusalem is destroyed. The narrator himself is in exile. Rabbi Eleazar cannot relieve his own suffering because "a prisoner cannot release himself from prison." This is precisely the case of Rabbi Johanan, related elsewhere in the same passage, when *he* falls sick and Rabbi Hanina heals him. "Why did he not heal himself?" the Talmud asks. The reply: "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison."

### *exile in the land of israel: the irony of theme*

WE CAN NOW CONSIDER another genre which Agnon introduces by structural allusion, and observe how several interpretations in a single homily are integrated into the design of irony. The ambivalent attitude of the author wrests the homily from the naive use of the narrator and appropriates it to the ironic. The opening description of the gravekeeper's decline borrows from a traditional source:

*He acquired property near his town and lost his money. Then he leased his field and lost his lease . . . he rented gardens; birds ate them . . .*

The concatenation of failures is structured to parallel three midrashic readings of Ecclesiastes 4:6, "Better is a handful of quietness than both hands full of labor and desire of the spirit" (*re'ut ruah*). Agnon has deftly incorporated into his fiction the following three Rabbinic interpretations of that verse:

*. . . Better is he who has a kitchen garden and fertilizes it and hoes it and earns his livelihood out of it, than he who leases gardens from others on terms of half profits (by way of proverb they say: 'one who leases one garden eats birds, one who leases many gardens, the birds eat him'), which is but 'the desire of the spirit'—it is his ambition to be acclaimed a landowner.*

*Rabbi Isaac explained the verse as referring to the tribe of Reuben and to the tribe of Gad. When these entered the Land, and saw how much sowing capacity and planting capacity was there, they said, 'Better is a handful of satisfaction in this land, than both hands full of trouble on the other side of the Jordan.' In the end they said: 'Have we not ourselves chosen it for ourselves?' . . .*



*Another interpretation: 'Better is a handful of nahath,' that is a handful of (the flour of) the free-will offering (minḥah) of a poor man . . . since (it) carries with it expiation.'*<sup>11</sup>

Vain ambition, the interpretations agree, invites disappointment. All the dichotomies in the Midrash are weighted in favor of the modest, the frugal, the spiritual. Of the three interpretations here cited, the first provides Agnon with the personal history of the gravekeeper, the second establishes the polarity of Zion and Exile, and the third contributes the crucial phrase *a handful (of the flour) of the free willing offering of a poor man*.

The first interpretation, in which Agnon couches the personal history of the gravekeeper, is combined with the second—the polarity of Zion and the exile—to symbolize the condition of Israel in the Diaspora, and is focussed on the delusions of life outside the Land of Israel, thus sustaining and re-enforcing the Vanity Fair theme. In addition, Agnon has ironically interpolated an allusion to Isaiah's prophecy of universal peace. All his ventures having failed, the young man opened a store and dealt in ploughshares and pruning forks, but soon war broke out and his ploughshares were beaten into swords and his pruning forks into lances. He fails equally in the spiritual commerce of prophetic visions, missions and peace. There is, on the one hand, no market for peace. On the other, to accept the business of peace as Israel's calling in the Exile is to set up shop in Vanity Fair. So much for Israel's material and moral enterprises in the Diaspora. In the end "the birds eat him." He finds his place not as a merchant of peace but as a keeper of graves.

Agnon uses the symbiotic conjunction of these two interpretations again in the story "Betrothed," to define the paradoxical condition of the young community of Jaffa. The people in that story have returned to the Land of Israel, but the lives they lead are banal and vulgar. The atmosphere of the story is charged with pagan motifs. The geographical reality of the Holy Land is not enough to combat the ubiquitous reality of Exile. The six girls that Rechnitz courts have been propagated by Agnon's fictive fission to give special force to the odds against the characteristically passive male of Agnon's stories in his confrontation with the compelling initiative of woman. The fathers of two of the girls are doubles whose experience of Exile in the Land of Israel is a paradoxical recurrence of the gravekeeper's sojourn in the graveyard of the Diaspora.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Leviticus Rabbah*, chapter 3. Translated by J. J. Slotki.

Yehiel Luria,<sup>12</sup> the father of Leah, embodies the traditional aspect of the gravekeeper. He came to study Torah and work the land,

*except that there he had great hopes for his life in the Land of Israel, whereas in the Holy Land itself half his hopes were gone. . . . He took what remained of his wife's dowry and went into business. The result was that he lost her money and was left with nothing but his Torah . . . (he) hired himself out to one of the farmers . . . he became a teacher . . . but received no satisfaction from it, for his pupils did not respond to what he tried to teach. So he left his school and went down to Jaffa, and with the help of his wife's relatives in Berlin, started a shop for ploughshares and pruning forks. . . .*<sup>13</sup>

Boris Heilperin, the metamorphosis of the secularist aspect of the gravekeeper, realizes the other experiences of the midrashic interpretations.

*. . . he went and rented fields from an Arab . . . he left his fields and came to Jaffa and opened a shop there for lime, cement and construction materials. His business received no blessing, just as Luria's business received no blessing. . . .*<sup>13</sup>

The dramatic irony is articulated by the paradoxical situation of Exile in the Holy Land. Luria and Heilperin, the story tells us, have not achieved blessing. This blessing is another allusion that Agnon has interpolated into the structure of this homily in the opening paragraph of "Soil of the Land of Israel" as well. The gravekeeper's ventures have failed because "There is no blessing in property outside the Land." This alludes to a dictum in *Genesis Rabbah* (74:1)<sup>14</sup> that is woven into a con-

---

12 The name Luria suggests Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572). Heilperin suggests Rabbi Yehiel Heilperin (1660-1745). The first names have been exchanged, Yehiel linked with Luria and Boris, a scrambled acronym for Rabbi Isaac Ben Solomon, attributed to Heilperin. Agnon has used this method in other stories. Thus the doubles in the story "Many Knots" (*Kishrei K'sharim*) are called Emden and Eibeschuetz, principals in a famous controversy. On names in Agnon's stories, see Y. Bahat, *S. Y. Agnon and H. Hazaz* (Haifa, 1962), pp. 157-158; B. Kurzweil, *op. cit.*, p. 140. Rabbi Isaac Luria developed a mystical doctrine of divine Exile. See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1946), p. 261.

13 S. Y. Agnon, *Two Tales* (New York, 1966), pp. 35-37.

14 A variant of the Rabbinic dictum appears in another suggestive text. To Genesis 46:6, "And they took their cattle and their possessions which they had acquired in the Land of Canaan, and came to Egypt, Jacob and all his children with him," Rashi remarks: "But all he had acquired in Paddan-Aram he gave to Esau for his share (right to burial) in the cave of Machpelah. He said: 'Property acquired outside the Land of Israel is of no value to me.'"

text of images and ideas which it makes relevant to the underlying irony of our story.

*“And the Lord said unto Jacob: Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred, and I will be with thee” (Genesis 31:3). It is written, “I have cried unto Thee, O Lord; I have said: Thou art my refuge, my portion in the land of the living” (Psalms 142:6). But surely “The land of the living” is none other than Tyre and its environs, where there is plenty and everything is cheap; yet you say, “My portion in the land of the living!” It means, however, the land whose dead will be the first to be resurrected in the days of the Messiah. Resh Lakish in Bar Kappara’s name deduced it from the following verse: “He giveth a soul unto the people upon it” (Isaiah 42:5). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him (Jacob): “Thou hast prayed, ‘Let my portion be in the land of the living.’ Then return unto the land of thy fathers and to thy kindred, and I will be with thee. Thy father waits for thee (there), thy mother waits for thee, and I Myself wait for thee.” Rabbi Ammi said in the name of Resh Lakish: God said to Jacob, “There is no (lasting) blessing in property outside the land; but once thou hast returned to the land of thy fathers, I will be with thee.”*

By tracing the allusion to its root we find it in its natural habitat, where the conjunction of verses produces two ideas: 1) “My portion in the land of the living” (the phrase the gravekeeper uses in his letter to the narrator) signifies the land whose dead will be resurrected first. 2) “Return to the land of thy fathers . . . and I will be thee . . . I Myself wait for thee.” This is a promise: “There is no blessing in property outside the Land; but once thou hast returned to the land of thy fathers, I will be with thee.” Luria and Heilperin came to the Land, but He was not with them. There was no blessing in their business and no divine quality in their lives. The gravekeeper in the Diaspora is in exile but, as we shall see, so is the narrator who return to Zion.

The gravekeeper’s request (at the end of the first chapter) for the package of soil from the Land of Israel which will assure him expiation and resurrection is patterned after the third interpretation. Here sacred imagery looms in the background. The free-will offering of the poor man is a handful of flour, the handful of *nahat* offered in the Temple, that carries with it expiation. It is this handful (*kometz*) that Agnon transmogrifies into the handful of soil from the Land of Israel which grants expiation—“and His soil shall expiate His people” (Deuteronomy 32:43)

The first literary record of the custom of interring the dead with some

soil from the Land of Israel is apparently late, appearing in the seventeenth century. Rabbi Eliyahu HaCohen reports: "I have heard that if some soil from the Land of Israel is placed on the eyes of the deceased, and on his navel and circumcision, it is considered that he is actually buried in the Land of Israel."<sup>15</sup> This handful of soil is the guarantee of resurrection. The dead cannot live again in the Diaspora; only contact with the soil that imparts life will afford renewed life. The mythic opposite of the gravekeeper's situation is symbolized by the package of soil: Exile-death strives for Zion-life.

Where religion conceives a design of holiness, sacred structures in time and space that exist in essential differentiation, secularism sees no such degrees or levels of reality. The structure of the holy has disintegrated. When Zion is the navel of the world, the sense of the holy is expressed in the posture of orientation, that primal sense of direction that is developed out of the awareness of qualitative and quantitative distance which separates man from the center of being and defines his spiritual condition. The gravekeeper is in this posture of orientation. He makes a mythic request of the narrator whom he visualizes in his letter as "walking in the land of the living in the holy city of Jerusalem." He asks him for a handful of soil which will assure resurrection.

Whereas the gravekeeper's initial request is just for soil from the Land of Israel, in his letter he refers to it as "a *handful* of soil" and the narrator recalls it also in hieratic terminology as "a *handful* of soil." The phrase is interwoven with the other two elements of the pattern of allusion. Thus in chapter two he meditates:

*The problem of that man came before me. He had owned fields and they were torn away from him. He had leased from others and was driven away. He opened a shop, troops emptied it and finally he became a gravekeeper. Many parcels of ground had been his and none of them remained in his possession; now the only hope of that man is a little soil of the Land of Israel, and how could I not send it to him? Indeed, let him have his handful of soil.*

And in chapter five a reference to satisfaction (*korat ruah*) reveals the verse behind the midrashic interpretation as well (with *korat ruah* for *nahat ruah*) in a passage in which the narrator speaks to the sons of the now deceased gravekeeper:

*May you find satisfaction in your stay and may this Land find satisfaction*

---

<sup>15</sup> *Midrash Talpiyot* (Czernowitz, 1860), p. 63c.

*in you. Your father had many properties outside the Land and saw no blessing from them. Then he leased fields from others and saw no blessing from them, and then he became a merchant and saw no blessing from that. Then he was made a gravekeeper.*

The self-satisfaction of the narrator is founded on delusion. He has come to Zion for the handful of soil, prepared to treat the gravekeeper's request for resurrection with assurance, even condescension, but the author has engaged him unawares in a more serious quest: ". . . But once thou hast returned to the land of thy fathers, I will be with thee." What happened to that guarantee? Here is an ironic reversal of mythic encounter. We will soon learn that the definition of Exile is absence of God. The gravekeeper's prefiguration of the narrator's predicament is now ready for its full ironic realization.

*the irony of symbol*

AGNON SUMS UP the disintegration of the hierarchical structure of the holy in the poignant reminiscence of the narrator, who recalls the changed status of a succession of acts and objects without penetrating to their symbolic quality. In his conversation with the gravekeeper, he recalls the days of peace and harmony,

*the days gone by when I had been a child studying Chumash and Rashi and he (i.e., the gravekeeper) had been a clever young man reading newspapers and secular literature. I was busy constructing the tabernacle and its vessels out of wax, and he was busy selling Zionist shekels and shares. I reminded him of our great joy when the cask of wine from Rishon L'Tzion was brought to town and he and all of the old Zionists had gone to the railroad station to welcome that cask. . . . And I reminded him of the day when oranges were first brought from the Land of Israel and the whole town had come to buy them. The rich bought a whole orange for each household, while the poor had to join in groups to get their share. . . . Now, I told him, in the Land of Israel we eat oranges as if they were potatoes, l'havdil, and even the poorest man in the Land of Israel eats many of them every day, swallowing the benediction, sucking the juice and spitting out the fruit. And as for wine, the Israelites have already forgotten all the blessings of wine which cheers God and man. And what do they yearn for but hard liquor, the drink of other peoples. . . . And they have another drink, soda by name, which is not in the category of drinks. It . . . turns the blood of Israelites to water.*

The narrator's recollections are in the sentimental vein. He and the

society he describes responded with unwarranted fervor to wine and orange from the Land of Israel. In the distant town of the Diaspora the wine is conceived of in the mythic mode, as nectar. It is described in terms of the phrase Jotham uses in his parable, "wine which cheers God and man" (Judges 9:13). The oranges are Paschal fruit: "The rich bought a whole orange for each household, while the poor had to join in groups to get their share" is an allusion to the Passover Lamb: "In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household" (Exodus (12:13)). The terminology of the narrator is technical: *join* and *groups* (*nimnu* and *haburot*)<sup>16</sup> are the terms used in Rabbinic literature to describe the arrangements for the Passover meal at which the sacrifice is eaten. To the narrator the fruit is still hallowed by its old name, "golden apple" (*tappuah zahav*, not *tappuz*). In comparing it to the lowly potato he makes the pious distinction, *l'havdil*.

The narrator's tale of the orange's decline is arranged by Agnon to comment on the basic unreality of a Diaspora religion that was founded on the sentiments of distance: deprivation, absence and nostalgia.<sup>17</sup> The

---

<sup>16</sup> See *Mekhilta* to passage; *Mishna Pesahim*, chapters 8-9; *Tosefta*, chapters 7-8. <sup>17</sup> See *A Lodger for the Night* (chapters 37-38), where Agnon again uses the orange as a symbol of sentimental attitudes.

An interesting and rather curious example of the hold of holy soil on the Exilic imagination is provided by James Joyce. He also uses the orange as an equivalent for a handful of soil. Leopold Bloom, the convert hero of Joyce's *Ulysses*, attends a friend's funeral in Dublin, the city of the dead. The following thought is woven into his fragmented ruminations: "Poor Dignam! His last lie on the earth in his box. . . . Lay me in my native earth. Bit of clay from the holy land" (p. 108). Through layers of apostasy, banality and alienation the promise of resurrection draws him. Bloom is the convert who cannot be integrated into the dense ethnic texture of Irish life. To the Irishman, and to his own deepest self, he always remains a Jew, an exile.

As he walks around Dublin on June 4, 1904, Bloom finds in a newspaper a prospectus for a Zionist project in Palestine. We see the advertisement as it registers on Bloom's mind: "Agendath Netaim: Planter's company. To purchase vast sandy tracts from Turkish government and plant with eucalyptus trees. . . . Orangegroves and immense melonfields north of Jaffa. You pay eight marks and they plant a dunam of land for you with olives, oranges, almonds or citrons. . . . Every year you get a sending of the crop. . . . Can pay ten down and balance in yearly installments. Bleibtreustrasse 34, Berlin W. 15" (p. 60).

Through the long day, as thousands of images pass through his consciousness, the orange groves emerge again and again. The oranges symbolize to Bloom a triple memory. In a life that is an endless series of banalities, he dreams first of all the archtypal dream of the East, man's deepest dream of renewal and resurrection. In the Jew within the convert Bloom, the racial memory is stirred; the address is Bleibtreustrasse: remain faithful, remain loyal. These are joined in the Zionist dream of national revival which the Agendath Netaim represents.

This dream of the East is the instinct for survival in its most radical form. Turn-

tension of distance fired the sense of the holy. It turned oranges into Paschal sacrifices. In the *Lan dof Israel*, where the palate is not sweet with the fragrance of yearning, the hierarchies of sacerdotal experience are ironically reversed. In the real land, where absence becomes presence, oranges are oranges or potatoes, blood turns to water and wine becomes soda. There is a deliberate devaluation of all sacerdotal experience. The sentimental symbols, no longer nourished by yearning, collapse into reality. The metamorphosis of each symbol is animated on the author's part by a curative irony.

The first sentence of the excerpt cited above juxtaposes two worlds: the child building a model tabernacle (an authentic imitation of the holy) and the young man selling the Zionist shekel (a dubious imitation). Here Agnon touches on the problematic nature of modern religious experience. The child participates in religion in a *naive* way. His model tabernacle is indeed a miniature sanctuary. The young man who reads secular literature participates in a *sentimental* way. His Zionist activity is a distorted resemblance of sacred experience. Both the child and the young man, however, are representatives of an epigene religion whose efforts to recover classic experience range the mimetic imagination from pious play to sentimental masquerade.

The implicit criticism in the author's juxtaposition, in the reader's impression of the succession of memories is, in addition, that secularism hides its blasphemies in the same psalms in which religion hides its narrowness. The traditional tongue of Jewish faith has become a diabolical system of homonyms which is abused by profane motives. Even more decadent is the calculated evocation of old emotional attitudes that have been emptied of their spiritual content and are exploited for ends that are inimical or ambivalent in their attitude to religion. When the *gestalt* of a parallel experience is used for conceptual approximation or education of the emotions, it has, as Rudolph Otto has shown in the relation of the sublime to the holy, great value for religion; but when placebo sentiments induce quasi-religious experience, the structural similarity is a deception.

Agnon is again saving nostalgia from sentimentality. He is criticizing the decadent narrowness, the inability to distribute intense religious emotion over the wider range of experience. In desymbolizing, Agnon is

---

ing to the East signifies metaphysical orientation, aligning oneself with the center of being, the navel of the world through which life flows. Bloom's dream is the dream of an exile whose extensive property in the East has been mortgaged. He serves not only as a sensitive reflector of Dublin's life, but also as a more comprehensive symbol of man as an exile, of life as *The Exile*.

applying I. A. Richards' cure for sentimentality: "The only safe cure for a mawkish attachment to an illusory childhood heaven, for example, is to take the distorted sentiment and work it into close and living relation with some scene concretely and truthfully realized, which may act as a standard of reality and awaken the dream-infected object of the sentiment into actuality."<sup>18</sup>

Into the tale of the narrator Agnon has set a short history of the deterioration of traditional values. Moreover, the whole series of graduated acts of the narrator's recollection has been arrayed by the author in an inverted manner. The natural disposition of the symbolic objects would locate the handful of soil, the child's sanctuary, wine, oranges, soda, water and potatoes, in that order, along a line running from Zion to the farthest reach of the Diaspora. In fact, however, the soil is sacred only in the Exile. Paradoxically, soda and potatoes belong in Zion.

This same logic of devaluation by symbolic inversion appears in the story "A Whole Loaf." On his way to the post office the narrator sees many people drinking soda at kiosks. He uses a curious circumlocution for kiosk: *lishkot hagazoz*, "chambers of soda," which is to be taken as a punning allusion to *lishkat hazazit*, the chamber of hewn stone, the seat of the Sanhedrin in the Temple. As the center of holiness is approached, the symbol of vulgarity is used. Once again the paradoxical juxtaposition of the center of holiness and the drink of the common man impresses on the reader's consciousness a sense of the deterioration of the holy.

Thus the consul of the story "Betrothed," who is urban, assimilated and completely divorced from the traditional myths as well as from the Zionist reality of the Land, decides to break his journey and spend the winter in "the Holy Land." He inhales the fragrance of oranges from the garden and thinks of Europe. He says, "Go tell my countrymen that while they're sitting over their cold cabbage with their blood congealing from the cold, we here take dinner by the open window." Because to the consul Jaffa is not in the Land of Israel but in the Holy Land of European thought, there is still distance and tension in his attitude to the country. If it were truly the Land of Israel, oranges (in the logic of inverted distance) should have lost their sacred quality and become potatoes or cabbage.

This logic of Exile is carried to its extreme in the story. "A Covenant of Love." Three old men sitting on the beach at Jaffa exchange confidences. They have all been disillusioned with the reality of the

---

18 I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (New York), p. 254.



Holy Land. One of them runs the sand through his fingers and sighs, "The Land of Israel, like a man who calls something by its name but doubts whether it is really it. . . . His friend said to him. 'Be calm, grandfather, Jaffa isn't the Land of Israel. How do we know that? From the prophet Jonah. When he sought to flee from God where did he flee? He went down to Jajffa.'" The old men sense that the *whole* land in truth is in Exile.

*ironic reversal at the post office*

AFTER RETURNING TO THE Land of Israel, the narrator does not vouchsafe an affirmative reply to the gravekeeper's request for a handful of soil, and out of negligence and laziness puts him off with the assurance that there is still time. But when he finally obtains the soil and tries to send it, he encounters inscrutable restrictions. The clerk in the post office frustrates his efforts, insisting that the neat package does not comply with postal regulations. The narrator is bewildered by the intricate bureaucratic mysteries and the post office soon becomes, in the manner of Kafka, the institution which represents the irrational demands of the divine claim on man.

The post office is an ambiguous symbol standing both for the absolute secular and for the compromised holy. Before we examine the second, more symbolic meaning of the post office, we can adequately explain the difficulties encountered in sending the soil by applying the story's own logic of distance. The sacred experience of differentiated space is acute in direct proportion to the intensity of the sense of distance. However, modern man's sense of distance has been enervated by his successful attempts to abolish space. Travel by train and airplane have radically changed our experience of space. Paul Ginestier writes of this phenomenon, "Indeed, psychically, space seems essentially proportionate to the time needed to traverse it; and space as a concrete entity is always seen as a restriction in man's world."<sup>19</sup> Ginestier discusses the attempts of poetry to cope with this basic change in human sensibility. We have watched the holy recede in this story, and chaos, or exile, or alienation (all describe the same condition) follow the ebb tide inexorably to its very source. To try to send the handful of sacred soil through the mail is therefore futile and absurd, for the function of the post office is to reduce space. It is inherently an instrument of desacralization which is designed as an equalizer of terrestrial spaces, and hence negates the modalities of a Zion-oriented reality. The distinct hierarchies

---

<sup>19</sup> Paul Ginestier, *The Poet and the Machine* (New Haven, 1961), p. 76.

of space do not exist for the mailman. Holy soil cannot travel in the secularist pouch.

There is a deeper symbolic level of meaning to the post office incidents. Upon the narrator's return to Jerusalem the story does more than simply move forward on the same level. Although this is the middle of the story, it is not really—or not only—a continuation of the first part. It shifts into a new dimension, the theological interior. First, the atmosphere is different, the mood is more tense. Secondly, now that the narrator is clearly the victim, the attitude of the author to him has perceptibly changed. The distance between them is not as great as it was in the beginning of the story. Thirdly, as in other stories, Agnon proceeds by analogical technique, building the story on a series of parallel encounters whose repetition forms the pattern of the story.<sup>20</sup> In this story, however, the encounters do not proceed in a normal sequence. The theological-psychological modification of the pattern is extreme because, fourthly, the theme of Exile now cuts vertically to the theological core of man's condition of alienation.

The first part of the story serves as an ironic analogue. The order of the holy is established on the gravekeeper's sense of distance. He prefigures the narrator, whose sense of distance is not horizontal or geographical but acutely vertical, a sense of absolute distance between God and man. Here not order or holiness, but chaos prevails. The experience of exile is realized in an entelechy of spiritual alienation. Thus in his first visit to the post office the narrator finds:

*The post office was filled with Israelites and with the rest of all nations which are in Jerusalem, their hands filled with bundles, and the clerk was sitting behind a window going about his business. Taking a place in line, I waited until He who dwells in this house would put it in His heart to bring me near again.*

"This house" echoes Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple, in which he mentions "this house" several times:

*That Thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place where Thou hast said: My name shall be there; to hearken unto the prayer which Thy servant shall pray toward this place . . ." (1 Kings 8:29-30).*

---

<sup>20</sup> See A. L. Strauss, *B'darkhei Hasifrut* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 148-153; Gershon Shaked, "Structural Problems in Agnon's Works," in *L'agnon Shai* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 307-330.

For Israelite and stranger alike, the Temple is the focus of prayer. The post office here symbolizes the Temple, the place set aside for man to approach God, the place where man can have guaranteed communication with God.

The phrase "I waited until *He who dwells in this house* would put it into His heart to bring me near again" alludes to the formula with which one who is under the ban was to be greeted in the Temple:

*Whosoever it was that entered the Temple Mount came in on the right and went round and came out on the left, save any whom aught befell, for he went round to the left. "What aileth thee that thou goest to the left?" . . . "Because I am under a ban." "May He that dwelleth in this House put it into their hearts to bring thee near again!" So Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Jose said to him: "Thou wouldst make it as though they (who had pronounced the ban) had transgressed against him in judgment!—But, rather, (they say) "May He that dwelleth in this House put it into thy heart to listen to the words of thy fellows that they may bring thee near again!"<sup>21</sup>*

Alienation is complete. The man who would communicate with God finds himself in a state of excommunication. The primary channel of communion is closed. The Temple is no longer the guarantee that man's prayers will be heard.

Agnon alludes to the harsher greeting which is formulated by Rabbi Meir, in which it seems that the judge rather than the sinner has transgressed. The 'land of the living' hardly seems to be that any more. As he waits in the post office the narrator thinks:

*Does that gravekeeper lack land in his own town that he yearns precisely for a handful of soil from the land of Israel? In my mind's eye I saw the fertile land of his town, and it brought to mind the wheat and rye, fruits and vegetables and other things the ground produces, in contrast to this parched earth burned up like bones lying out in the sun unburied.*

Nor is the companion promise, "Once thou hast returned to the land of thy fathers, I will be with thee" fulfilled. The narrator has been betrayed. Faith has been violated. He is now in a state of spiritual excommunication, under the ban of *hevean, menudeh lashamayim*.<sup>22</sup> He

---

<sup>21</sup> *Mishnah Middot* 3:2, translated by H. Danby. A heretical association may also be involved. See *Yoma* 1:5, where the elders of the Court adjure the High Priest "by him that made his name to dwell in this house that thou change naught of what we have said unto thee."

<sup>22</sup> On this category of excommunication see *Pesahim* 113b.

does not achieve blessing in the Land itself because cosmic exile has pervaded all. The spiritual possessions acquired by religion in the course of centuries have been expropriated.

The established structures of the holy have been destroyed. The Temple is emptied. When he goes to the post office on his third visit, the narrator observes:

*When I entered the post office, I found no one there. It was not a festival and not a non-Jewish holiday; nevertheless it stood almost empty. Where was that crowd (ukhlas) of people who stood pressing and pushing each other? Of course—when they heard that story (i.e. of embezzlement by the post office clerk) they began to worry about putting their money in the care of the mails.*

Two descriptions of the ancient Temple Mount are alluded to in this episode. The pressing and pushing of the crowd derives from the miraculous condition of worship in the Temple when the people stood pressed together but had room to bow.<sup>23</sup> The word “crowd” (*ukhlas*) in a talmudic passage again refers to the days gone by when religion thrived:

*Bcn Zoma saw a crowd on the Temple Mount. He said: Blessed is the knower of secrets and blessed is He who created all of these to serve me.*<sup>24</sup>

But now the crowds are gone. There has been a breach of trust, an embezzlement of the funds of faith. People no longer consider the postal system dependable.

The regulations of the post office are like the incomprehensible rules of the court in Kafka's *The Trial*. The narrator deals with a mere clerk, as Joseph K. in Kafka's story deals only with subordinate judges. The supreme authority is inaccessible. The regulations are the Law which man does not understand and cannot satisfactorily observe. Even the Temple builders would be hard put to understand the ritual minutiae of the Law.

*This thing depends on luck and not even Solomon and Bezalel would be able to realize what this clerk really had in mind.*

The people of Jerusalem wait in the post office, “their hands filled

---

<sup>23</sup> See *Abot* 5:2; *Yoma* 21a.

<sup>24</sup> *Berakhot* 58a.

with many bundles (*havilot havilot*)." After the clerk rejects the narrator's bundle "he told me the laws concerning bundles (*hilkhot havilot*). . . . Bundles and bundles of laws (*havilot havilot shel halakhot*) did he teach me." When the narrator returns home, he examines his bundle. "I tried to remember the laws (*halakhot*) but I could not recall any." The same phrases (*havilot, halakhot*) appear again in the description of the narrator's second visit to the post office, stirring up many talmudic associations regarding the Law, such as: "Commandments should not be performed in bundles, i.e. many at a time (*havilot havilot*)."<sup>25</sup> The Law's demands are too much for the supplicant. The open channel of tradition has become a maze of bureaucratic red tape.

### *atmosphere*

THE ANXIETY, guilt and alienation of the narrator have close affinities to the atmosphere of Agnon's *The Book of Deeds*. Indeed, the story is an excellent introduction to the stories of *The Book of Deeds*. The condition of excommunication we have perceived in this story is an excellent example of the peculiarly abstract quality of alienation in this type of Agnon story. The state of being under the ban of Heaven places the hero outside the normative structure of religion while still applying a religious category to his spiritual status. The deeds in these stories seem to be autonomous. They operate in haphazard, perverse, coincidental patterns of their own. They are not controlled by will or personality. Van der Leeuw writes of religious conduct: "Behavior, in other words, must accord with the powerful, that reveals itself through him. How he behaves, or even how he sits, or stands, or lies down is thus no matter of indifference. . . ." <sup>26</sup> In the category of the holy, a deed is not a neutral act. It is elevated to celebration, or rite. But in *The Book of Deeds* experience is no longer sacred. In the amorphous welter of happenings and doings, the hero feels his acts are futile. They don't count. They do not form a pattern of purpose and volition. The radical dissociation of intent and deed make each man his own *dıhbuk*, occupying and possessing his self, but never achieving a sense of identity. His spiritual sensibility is atrophied.

In this predicament of alienation man's gestures can no longer open to the divine. The rudderless deeds have no organic context or causal

---

<sup>25</sup> *Berakhot* 49a, *Pesahim* 102b, *Sotah* 8a. See also *Avodah Zarah* 19a, *Baba Metzia* 84b, *Sanhedrin* 42a.

<sup>26</sup> G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York and Evanston), p: 340.

relationship; they float in an emotional as well as a theological vacuum. The passive hero finds himself an observer, an object, a victim. His self is no longer the source and focus of his behavior. Since coherent structures of personality or society no longer control the acts of men, the demands that come down from the vertical infinitudes of unbridgeable distances, and hold man responsible for deeds that he cannot control, are patently unjust. The inner psychic distance between man and his acts reflects the distance between man and God. Everything is wholly other. There is neither contiguity of personal experience nor sense of divine immanence. Distance fills the barren space between all things. Everything has been divested of complex relationships, of the sense of direct experience, and has become an abstraction without personality.

### *interpreting the theme*

NOW THAT HE UNDERSTANDS the scheme of things the narrator is angry with himself. He realizes he has been living a life of tranquil delusion.

*The doubters and skeptics and the suspicious alone are men of truth, for they see the world as it is, unlike those who are happy with their lot and with their life, for it so happens that their happiness hides the truth from their eyes.*

He begins to scrutinize the system of justice. Although in his childhood he always prayed for the welfare of the government and the Emperor, doubts now plague him. "My heart was not whole," i.e. heretical thoughts nest within him. Finally the clerk who has refused the bundle turns embezzler and flees. "He (who) restrained the compassion of The Holy One" is now gone. A young woman takes his place in the post office and accepts the bundle immediately.

Examination of the story's vocabulary at this point shows that Agnon envisions the male clerk as the divine attribute of justice and the female clerk as the divine attribute of mercy. The man represents "harsh decree." The girl is young, lovely, proper and has a good heart. Her voice is pleasant. When she asks the narrator what he wants, he replies that he wants to send a handful of soil.

*. . . out of my lady's kindness (b'hasdah) perhaps it would be possible for her to take the bundle . . .*

She finds the bundle well-tied and accepts it. The narrator leaves the post office praising "the authorities who had appointed lovely creatures

for the pleasure of the people.”<sup>27</sup> He had hoped, “Perhaps this is a propitious time and my bundle will be accepted (*sh’at ratzon utekubal ḥavilati*).” It was indeed an hour of grace, for across the sea the gravekeeper receives the handful of soil a short time before his death “and truly his prayer was accepted (*nitkabbalah tefillato*).” The bundle (*ḥavilah*) is now conceived of as prayer, *tefillah*, and is finally accepted.

Whether or not the bundle really meets the regulations of the bureaucracy is quite irrelevant. The crucial question is whether the divine system chooses to abide by the minute regulations and unfathomable demands of harsh justice, or to turn to man with the aspect of kindness, mercy and grace. Here we have reached the climax of the plot as well as the key moment of the story, the point at which the meaning is fully revealed. How are we to interpret this moment? The happy ending that follows, in which the soil reaches the gravekeeper, and his sons come to settle in the Land of Israel, seems to belie by its happy coincidence the desperate anguish of the inner theological struggle. For the discrepancy between the story’s parts indicates that irony is at work. As far as doctrine goes, the revelation of grace at the expense of the perverse, negative response of justice is certainly untenable. But our concern is fiction, not normative theology. We are concerned with Agnon’s own vision rather than the tradition’s. To suppose that Agnon’s view of anything always coincides with that of the tradition is a naive, unwarranted assumption. We are dealing with a master ironist. We must try to determine here how his irony is operating, in order to know what the story’s theme finally is.

#### *how the theme means*

WE HAVE NOTED that the detachment which the author’s irony afforded him in the first part of our story has practically vanished in the middle episode. The distance between author and narrator has closed. The narrator has moved into the gravekeeper’s condition of exile, but the author has made a double move, as it were, assuming the state of exile along with the gravekeeper. For irony is not incompatible with love. It can be compassionate and self-inclusive. So in this story it has been modified to *self-irony* from mordant, and at times whimsical, detachment. The theological encounters of the narrator are treated in earnest. The concerns of the author and narrator are the same. We must then look for the irony in another area.

---

<sup>27</sup> See the benediction on which this is based: *Berakhot* 43b and 58b. See also notes 5 and 24. As frequently in Agnon, a pattern of allusion is formed by drawing methodically on a single source.

Agnon has dealt with the theme of alienation in other stories, and there too the unpredictable shining forth of grace saves the hero from utter dejection. The revelation of love is as arbitrary as the demands of justice. Thus in the story "With the Coming of Evening," the dense atmosphere of spiritual danger is suddenly dispelled by the shining forth of a Torah scroll in the ark.

*. . . I stood and prayed like those with prayer shawls and kittels. My little girl who had fallen asleep repeated each prayer in her sleep with sweet melodies that no ear had ever heard. I am not exaggerating nor am I overstating.*

So also in "To Father's House" the happy, unrelated end is an arbitrary revelation of grace.

*There was suddenly a sound like a sheet being torn. Actually no sheet had been torn, but a small cloud in heaven was rent and the cloud being rent, the moon emerged and cut through the clouds and a sweet light shone on the house and on father.*

Especially germane to the discussion of the theme is the story "In the Forest and in the Town," where a dichotomy is presented between the institutions of Town, Family, Home, Synagogue and School on the one hand and the non-cultural state of Forest, Nature, Freedom and even Crime on the other. In his excellent analysis of the story, A. L. Straus has discussed<sup>28</sup> its romantic theme, showing that the revelation of divine grace to the murderer on his way to execution is an incisive statement by Agnon that grace is capricious by nature, that it can carry God's love to man outside of the institutions that religion and civilization have established as exclusive channels of divine love. The emptiness of the post office in our story at the hour of grace is also a hint that the institution no longer controls God's love for men.

That the meaning of the story is indeed conveyed in the act of saving grace is confirmed, as we have seen, by the symbolism of the story itself. That this theme is found in other stories we have also seen. The facile resolution, however, indicates an irony that must be accounted for.

---

28 A. L. Strauss, *op. cit.* See also Arnold Band, "A Jewish Existentialist Hero," *Judaism*, Summer 1961, who discusses "A Whole Loaf" in terms of this theme.



*the ironic pattern of the book of job*

THE PATTERN of a story, as distinct from other elements (story, plot, character or theme) is decisive in fiction, frequently fixing and occasionally limiting the operation of the other elements. E. M. Forster, in his discussion<sup>29</sup> of pattern in story, shows how Henry James sacrificed many interests of the novel so that its pattern would triumph. He also gives examples of hour-glass patterns and chain patterns that give stories their unity.

The theme of suffering, judgment and grace in "Soil of the Land of Israel" is the theme of Job, and the pattern of the story is the pattern of the book of Job.<sup>30</sup> The relationship of the two parts of the story bears a close structural analogy to the two tales contained in the book of Job—the prose tale with its traditional view of suffering and submission, which is the framework of the book, and the poetic tale with its more personal anguish. Just as the poetic Job seeks a confrontation with God, demands justice and does not receive it, so the narrator of our story is not afforded justice. Just as the prose ending of the Job tale is not nurtured by the poetic dialogues, does not really answer in prose the questions asked in verse, so our inner story, what we have called the theological interior, is not completely integrated into the outer one. It is this *non sequitur* which draws attention to the psychological incongruity of the ending.

To regard the vision of the irrational glimpsed in the inner story as an ironic correlative that turns the coincidence of the plot into theological accident, is to approach the problem of inscrutable justice as a rationalist, a view that Agnon's *The Book of Deeds* (to which this story is an excellent prelude) decidedly does not maintain. To seek justice in the world of dislocated and unrelated deeds is to involve oneself in a futile, obsolete search for clear cause-and-effect relationships. The sense of contingency which pervades the lives of men in these stories finds precise correspondence in the whim of divine temperament, in the sudden, arbitrary moment of grace. The ways of Providence that seem unreliable in the book of Job have gained profound psychological validity in the experience of man in *The Book of Deeds*. Here grace is not the guarantee of justice, an incomprehensible proof that assures the suffering victim that his Redeemer is just. After all, a transcendental

---

29 E. M. Forster, *Aspect of the Novel* (New York), pp. 149-169.

30 See William R. Mueller, *The Prophetic Voice in Modern Fiction* (Garden City, New York), pp. 79-105, for a discussion of the theme of judgment in Kafka's *The Trial* and *Job*.

God cannot be expected to appear in a world of history when history has disintegrated, when the sequences of time and space are no longer rational contexts of deeds. The only way left for justice to work is in the ephemeral epiphanies of grace in isolated deeds; and the only way for two deeds to join is by coincidence, by haphazard alignment; for both coincidence and grace are responses to surrealistic experience.<sup>31</sup>

The earlier cosmic irony which dwelled on the low state of man, on God's betrayal of man, is now transformed into what could perhaps be called divine irony. The narrator finds himself a prisoner who cannot free himself from the prison, a man who can no longer play the detached *ieron*. At this point we have seen the suspension of authorial irony too, as the author takes his place next to the narrator. For once the domain of *The Book of Deeds* is entered, there is little that purpose can accomplish either by detachment or engagement. It is God who now relates to the narrator as the narrator related to the gravekeeper.

The humble requests of the gravekeeper in his letters to the narrator now echo. "He asked me to grant him the favor (*hesed*)."<sup>31</sup> "He places his trust in me to deal favorably with him (*hesed*)."<sup>31</sup> And the answers of the narrator, assuring the gravekeeper that it still was not time to send the soil foreshadow the propitious time (*sh'at ratzon*) when prayer is accepted. For the handful of soil is the Land of Israel in miniature, and it works symbolically on two levels: to the gravekeeper it is the promise of resurrection, to the narrator it is the blessing of God's presence.

The coincidence, then, is organically tied to the moment of grace. They are both part of the same experience. For Agnon, the only way out of the many symbolic situations that we have examined—distance, Exile, graveyard, descent, prison, excommunication—is the showing forth of grace. Only then is the distance closed.

---

31 See Gershon Shaked, *op. cit.*, pp. 320-330 on coincidence in Agnon's stories.