

The Face Within A Face

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A Reading of S. Y. Agnon's "Panim Aherot"¹

THE TEXTURE OF THIS STORY² IS UNUSUALLY RICH in symbols. In order to explore subtle movements of emotion, Agnon has designed a symbolic pattern of image and action that dramatizes the relationship of two unimaginative people. A series of situations and deeds epitomizes, in a progression of illuminations, the emotional history of that relationship as well as its present status, giving it a dimension of depth and complication that derives from Agnon's technique rather than from any inherent emotional value. The cumulative effect of the modifying and intensifying development of images gives great resonance to the theme of the story.

The story's title indicates that it deals with a change, "an other aspect" or "a different aspect." Hartmann has just divorced his wife Toni. He is a businessman who has categorically separated business from private life, never discussing business at home. Love, sex, and marriage have been displaced by his preoccupation with commerce. His business represents the mean, the trivial, the routine, as well as the dehumanized, and the impersonal. Until now his life in its old aspect has been without dignity or sense of self. His mercantile values have not given him a sense of his own or his wife's worth. He has had no personal love for her. She was not an individual self to be respected but a sexual object or a possession. He had set up a household as one would set up a business, in an acquisitive spirit. It was an investment in stability and posterity, without intimacy or tenderness.

On different levels, through modes of narration that range from realistic detail to symbol, Agnon shows us the old Hartmann. The de-

1. "Panim Aherot," *Al Kapot Ha-Man-ul* (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 449-468. The title of the story has been variously translated as "An Other Aspect," "A Different Face," or "Metamorphosis."

2. Several valuable essays on the story are available (in Hebrew): David Zimmerman, *On Three Of Agnon's Stories* (Jerusalem, 1962), pp. 9-24; Lea Goldberg, *The Art of the Short Story* (Merhavia, 1963) pp. 204-221; Meshulam Tuchner, *Interpretation of Agnon* (1968), pp. 97-100. Two studies appeared after this article was written: Harai Golomb, "Combined Speech—a Major Technique in the Prose of S. Y. Agnon: Its Use in the Story 'A Different Face,'" *Hasifrut*, I,2 (Summer 1968), pp. 251-262; Harai Golomb, "Many Faces: On the Interrelations Between S. Y. Agnon's Short Story 'A Different Face' and Its Title," *Hasifrut*, I,3-4 (Fall-Winter 1968/9), pp. 717-718.

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velopment by symbolic analogy and parallel incident is characteristic of Agnon's narrative technique. Thus Swirsch and Tenzer, who greet Toni as she comes out of the divorce proceedings, are projections of the old Hartmann. Like Hartmann they have been close to Toni since the first year of her marriage, indicating that they are indeed Doubles of Hartmann. They are shallow, prurient, and without dignity or pride. They are described as cold, icy, pleasure-seeking, pale: one wears glasses, the other has manicured nails. They are creatures of the artificial, man-made world, oblivious of nature, freedom and magnanimity. Tenzer thinks of walking with Toni—"who has been Hartmann's yesterday and Swirsch's today"—tomorrow. They are time-minded day laborers who cannot love.

As the story opens, Hartmann takes Toni from these two in whom he recognizes—or perhaps it is only the reader who recognizes—aspects of his self. He takes Toni for a walk from the courthouse to the countryside, from law to nature. The countryside is used, characteristically, as an uncivilized region, a spiritual landscape which man can explore in search of the old virtues of freedom, dignity, and love, of his other self, the self untamed by custom and law.

An archetypal image is used to add depth. On leaving the city, Hartmann looks at the windows, "strangers to themselves and strangers to the houses." He takes in the city, in its sadness and alienation. Suddenly he sees a woman looking out of the window. This incident is given no explanation, but if it is related to Agnon's total system of symbols, it can be interpreted as an important link in the story's succession of images. As we recall the archetypal image of the mother looking out of the window in "The Kerchief," the nameless woman in our story also becomes a symbol of hope and longing, indicating the dimension of wholeness and integration to which Hartmann now aspires.³ Ironic symbol reinforces ironic incident: moments after his divorce a mute vision stirs in Hartmann's soul, a fugitive longing for the ideal home.

The new Hartmann, however, is not free of the old. The story is an account of the conflict of the two selves. The old values cannot be sloughed off with ease. Thus, when a young girl sells them flowers, Hartmann's reaction is praise for the child who gives him his money's worth. The new man emerging from his self-imposed isolation, from the years of evenings spent at home behind cover of cigar smoke, has not learned to appreciate flowers, only to appraise them. With each step to freedom, he is tripped up by the old Hartmann who will not be mastered.

A new communicativeness comes to him. The nervous gestures stop.

3. See my article, "The Vision of the Fallen House," *Midstream*, February 1967, for an interpretation of this image. In "The Kerchief" the final vision of the mother follows the surrealist description of a box of stones "out of which the sun shines." In our story the vision of the woman is preceded by a similar description of a desolate street in which "a rocky sadness bleats from among its stones."

The awkward, dour man who had until now rejected his wife's claims on his business life now begins to unravel the complications of his latest deals. We see how his failure in business corresponds to his failure in marriage. He has placed his trust in unworthy partners; on the other hand, he has not confided in his wife. The ironic contrast suddenly suggests that the marriage, no less than the business deal, can be saved by thinking things through together.

The new-found rapport amounts to telepathy. The insulated man who has been out of touch now possesses a rare sensitivity. A beautiful dialogue is carried on, each partner responding to what the other is thinking. When words are finally found they no longer seem necessary. The old Hartmann, however, still thinks of marriage in terms of business—the latter can be saved, why not the former? The old mentality, the old mode of thinking, has not been transfigured.

A new incident—a boy runs past with a lighted stick. Again, we are dealing with an incident which operates on a symbolic level of meaning. It illustrates another aspect of Agnon's use of symbol, the submerged symbol drawn from tradition by the use of allusion, that opens the story to the mythic. The symbol is drawn from the world of ritual. The Talmudic antecedent of this incident appears in *Berakhot* 53a where a series of cases are cited to clarify the laws of the *Havdalah* ceremony, the blessings over wine, spices, and light, at the close of the Sabbath, which separates the Sabbath from the weekdays. Three consecutive cases parallel the situation of our story, three brief idylls etched in the Palestinian evening, each beginning with a formula "If he was walking outside the city and saw. . . ." The second reads: "If he was walking outside the city and saw a child with a torch in his hand. . . ." The reverse side of the page deals with a stick (*ksm*) placed into the fire. In a subsequent Talmudic discussion, two pages later (55b), we find the awkward, compulsive gesture that Agnon uses to characterize Hartmann's discomfort: "If someone enters a city and fears the evil eye, let him hold the thumb of his right hand in his left hand and the thumb of his left hand in his right hand and let him say, "I descend from the seed of Joseph"

The symbolic pattern of allusion shows that we are dealing with a *Havdalah* ceremony, an act of ritual separation. Walking outside of the city, the divorced couple unwittingly witnesses a vision of a traditional ritual which informs the reader in an incisive manner, that separation has taken place, that Hartmann's dream of reconciliation is foredoomed. The various lights of lanterns and fireflies which abound in the story, present by analogy a prolonged celebration of separation; the various spices, the flowers the girl sells to them, Hartmann's cigarette, Toni's perfume, all are variations on the second blessing of the separation ritual—the benediction over spices. The wine, cognac and liqueur they drink at an inn are an imitation of the wine used for the first blessing. The

meal they have when they reach the inn is a modern, secular version of the sacred meal which is the main subject of the chapter "Three Who Ate" (*Berakhot* 51–53). The dream echoes the many pages of dream interpretation in the succeeding chapter of the Talmud. The anomalous physical types (albino, extraordinarily tall person, lame person) mentioned in our story are also discussed there (*ibid.*, 58b).

Agnon has spoken of Marc Chagall's desire to portray Rabbi Kook, to capture the face within his face.^{3a} This may be the meaning of the story's name. Thus, in Agnon's stories, an old scholar's face masks the face of Moses, another bears characteristics of R. Akiba, an ordinary home becomes a revelation of the Temple. Behind simple experience looms the world of ritual and cult. Man's utterly profane gesture willy-nilly imitates myth, religion, and ritual. The walk in the countryside was given ironic perspective by being structured after the Talmudic discussion of *Havdalah*. Other elements of the story reflect the laws of divorce that are discussed in the tractate *Gittin*. Agnon's imagination again transforms law into incident, and aggadic statements into complication of plot.

The situation of the divorced couple at the inn and the ambiguous status of their relationship is developed out of the law in *Gittin* 81: "If one divorces his wife and she spends the night with him at an inn . . .," which opens a discussion on the sexual attitude of a husband to his wife after they have been divorced. The important scene at the story's end, in which Hartmann recalls his falling from the mound and being thrown into a pit, reflects two laws in *Gittin* 66a: "One who was thrown into a pit and said . . . let him write a bill of divorce . . .," and, further on: "a healthy man who said 'write a bill of divorce for my wife,' and he went up to the roof . . .," thus indicating that the scene symbolizes Hartmann's attitude to divorcing his wife. Hartmann's earlier jealousy, his intolerance of Toni's friends, grows out of R. Meir's statement (90a) about the various types of tolerance or intolerance a husband can practice. Toni's dress, which preoccupies Hartmann, is adumbrated at the top of page 90b and in Rashi's comment thereto. Other suggestive passages abound. The last dictum of the tractate (90b), "whoever divorces his first wife—even the altar drops tears for him" faintly recalls the use of the same phrase, "drops tears," as Toni comes out of the courthouse. Many acts and words, such as the girl's trimming the vegetables, and Hartmann emerging as one who goes into the dark, echo passages in the Talmudic tractate. The laws of divorce have been transmuted into a tractate of fiction.⁴ Together with the symbolic use of the *Havdalah* laws, they shape the plot and the theme of the story.

3a. See the description of Yaacov Rechnitz in "Shevuat Emunim" in *Ad Henah*, p. 277, "Suddenly the face of Jacob became round and a second face was added around the visage of his face, like an artist to whom there has been revealed . . ."

4. The faces of the story recall the two faces, one a euphemism, in *Gittin* 76b.

The dominant mood of the story is one of modern anxiety. It is suffused with a disturbed sexual relationship that reflects spiritual confusion. It has a modern, West European background. When Agnon sets these anxious, mediocre, people against a background of myth, the effect is not, as in "The Kerchief," one that sustains and deepens the experience of the character. It is a parody—and not an enriching one like Francizk's distortion of a ritual blessing which proves to be ennobling.⁵ The characters do not measure up. They are ridiculous in their inadequacy. We see that they have no roots in the deeper reality of mythic consciousness which ritual acts out. The inner life of modern man is exposed by the ironic method of mythic parallel.

The careful design of image shot through with symbolism captures the elusive feelings of two unusually inarticulate people, giving them an unexpected density. It is technique exploring and discovering, which gives the story its interest and meaning. Thus the description of the opening sentence which abounds in the use of the color brown should not be taken to indicate Toni's warm, tender nature.⁶ The use of color should be compared and contrasted with the red hair of the buxom wench who works at the inn. She appears three times, immediately diverting Hartmann's attention from his wife and filling the air with erotic awakening. Her passionate, perhaps wanton, nature is opposed to Toni's conventional, proper provincialism. For Toni ought not to be cast as a victim of Hartmann's. She is mediocre in her own right, an assimilated Jewish Bovary, who dabbles in society, and flirtation, and reads many romances but has nothing much to say. After all, one wonders, what mature advice could she have given Hartmann that would have been worthwhile? She is in no sense closer to a real or profound grasp of life than her husband.

It is the old Hartmann who determines the relation to Toni. Several times Hartmann notices her missing tooth and sees signs of aging, but sexual anticipation rather than kindness prompts him to overlook them. He moves his hand through the air, caressing her shadow. Twice they meet young lovers whose desires permeate the air. Their shadows fall on Hartmann's and Toni's, again a reflection that crystallizes the sexual nature of Hartmann's attitude. The walk has sharpened their appetites, and the zest with which they devour their food is indicative of an aroused sexual appetite. The sexual connotation echoes in Hartmann's joyous declaration that the old dishes that have been finished and crossed off the menu will not be missed because "we ought to be happy that we will eat new foods." The word for new (other, *aherim*) is the same as the word for new in the story's title (*aherot*). As they sit smoking, their smoke intertwines in the air. The country air has stirred in him sex, not love.

5. See "In the Forest and in the Town," *Eilu V'eilu* (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 267-278.

6. Leah Goldberg, p. 207.

"I heard from afar the sound of a bird of prey. . . ."⁷ The new Hartmann has not much chance. His nature has predisposed him to the brutal side of the country (*Hartmann*) rather than to its idyllic aspect. Every attempt to make himself socially and sexually acceptable to Toni is thwarted by his basic spiritual meanness. The tenacious old Hartmann has not released his grip.

The middle-aged couple has been juxtaposed twice with a younger romantic couple. Aspects of Hartmann are also projected twice onto a set of Doubles, first Swirsch and Tenzer who crystallize negative qualities, and later, Zissenstein and his young companion who appear in the dream Hartmann recounts to Toni. Zissenstein comes from Africa the unknown continent, the wild unsettled region of freedom and spontaneity, unspoiled by society and industry. He has penetrated to the interior of the freedom that the new Hartmann is vaguely groping for. The ambivalence of this walk of discovery on Hartmann's part is represented by the young companion who bears himself *as if* he had been with Zissenstein on his journeys. Hartmann's search in the countryside has the same *as if* quality. When Zissenstein indicates he is looking for a new dwelling—i.e., a new wife—Hartmann offers to help him but it soon appears that it is Hartmann who is looking for a new apartment. The lame landlady has erotic charm. She attracts and repels at the same time. As he relates the dream Hartmann realizes she is really Toni. His dream is about his own marital difficulty, his own ambivalent attitude to his wife.

Zissenstein tells him that the apartment isn't adequate because there is no stove in the workroom only in the bedroom. This is probably to be interpreted as a realization that Hartmann's old domestic policy of departmentalized sexuality, of the concentration of erotic impulse in the bedroom, is a sin against the spontaneity he seeks. If civilization is not to imprison him in the norms of morals of conformity, he must distribute *eros* over all his activities. This is the way to a free self.

In a vague way Hartmann senses what the dream means. A new awareness comes over him, his sensibility has never been so awake. But his timing is off. His awakening has come too late. Toni is tired. The glimmer of new life is Hartmann's sudden flicker of comprehension before the final darkness settles over their relationship. An eventful day has passed. Night, a symbolic night, comes.

Hartmann has not, even in his new aspect, overcome his concern with appearances. The fact that he has not shaved in the morning upsets him unduly. As they return to the inn to seek lodging for the night, the old caretaker sees through appearances. Toni's wedding ring and the new rapprochement do not disguise the decisive act of divorce, which,

7. Zimmerman, p. 21, and now, Golomb, p. 256.

Hartmann himself felt before, "had assumed a tangible actuality." The ambiguous states of divorce discussed in *Gittin* do not obtain. The old man separates them, giving Toni the only available room.

Agnon adds an episode which epitomizes Hartmann's difficulty, with great immediacy. As he walks in the garden he mounts a high piece of ground and panics as he recalls a childhood incident when he fell from such an elevation. His early failure inspires a new fear in him and he quickly descends. It is the old mercantile caution and calculation that deprives him of dignity, of the courage to act and claim and conquer. He recalls the time he fell and the profound rest and repose that came over him as he lay with the sweet blood in his mouth. This passive serenity is an experience he longs for again. The crippled masculinity of Agnon's men asserts itself again. He reflects the incapacitated husband in the laws of divorce.⁸ There can be no reprieve for such men, no new aspect. The identification with Zissenstein in Africa was a wishful dream. Even the savage dignity of the brutish Francizk "In the Forest and in the Town," is beyond Hartmann. He is doomed to be alone as the thick wall separates him from Toni.

Symbolic patterns of illusion have controlled the story; an exploration of sensibility has been the story's focus of interest, not plot or character. Everything from landscape to incident is heightened by the symbolism which systematically informs the story, transforming mediocre experience into art.

8. *Gittin* 66a.