

Innocent Victims

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A Simple Story, by S.Y. Agnon, translated with an Afterword by Hillel Halkin. New York: Schocken Books, 246 pp., \$14.95.

In the Afterword to his translation of *A Simple Story* (*Sippur Pashut*, 1935), Hillel Halkin grapples forthrightly with the novel's paradoxes: If the work is an antiromantic comedy,

he poses, why does it involve so much pain? And if it projects a serious message about traditional values and social order, why do we, the readers, feel that Agnon, a confirmed *galitsianer*, is constantly pulling our leg? The truth is — as the novel's own narrative voice might put it — that the meaning of this delightful yet perplexing little novel

lies somewhere in between these two perspectives. Its purposeful ambiguity is precisely what makes the work so classic, so timeless — and so *un*simple.

The victim/hero of *A Simple Story* is Hirshl Hurvitz, son of Tsirl and Boruch Meir, well-to-do shopkeepers in the Galician town of Szybusz (meaning “muddle” or “mistake,” a name Agnon often used as a fictional counterpart to his hometown of Buczacz). In his late teens Hirshl falls in love with Blume, a poor, orphaned cousin, who comes to live with the Hurvitzes and becomes their housekeeper. Mother Tsirl

sees and fears the worst: she quickly enjoins the local matchmaker, Yona Toyber (both names mean "dove," referring to his potential clientele), to bring Hirshl under the wedding canopy with Mina Ziemlich ("suitable"), the *right* girl, daughter of Bertha and Gedalia, prosperous farmers in nearby Malikrowik. Through a series of missteps, mishaps, and misrepresentations, Hirshl and Mina find themselves in the center of attention at a raucous Chanukah party, which, unbeknownst to them, has been arranged for their surprise engagement announcement. Not long after, they marry and live. . . . And here is where the not-so-simple story begins.

Depressed and anxious, Hirshl deteriorates emotionally during the first year of marriage. At the dramatic center of the novel is a poignant portrait of Hirshl, standing in the rain at night outside the Mazal house, where Blume has taken refuge with friends, so as to catch a fleeting glimpse of his true love. Soon after, only several weeks before Mina gives birth to Meshulam ("completeness"), Hirshl suffers a nervous breakdown: he is found wandering in the fields outside Szybusz, wearing a shoe on his head, variously crowing like a rooster and croaking like a frog. According to several critical interpretations, Hirshl has been emasculated and falls from his middle-class status as a Jewish Galician Prince to a lowly — but temporary — state of frogdom.

Instead of being rescued and transformed by a princess's kiss (presumably Blume's), Hirshl is carted off to Vienna and, after several months' treatment, cured by an innovative psychiatrist, Dr. Langsam ("slowly" or "gradually"), probably the first psychiatrist to appear as a full character in modern Hebrew literature. The therapeutic method is quite interesting: Langsam sits with Hirshl and tells him stories of his own (Langsam's) hometown experiences. (Halkin correctly identifies the technique as transference.) Hirshl returns to Szybusz, reconciles with Mina — and, it appears, with Szybusz — fathers another son and lives . . . happily, we presume, for here the story is ended. "But," the narrator, ever playful and ambigu-

ous, notes at the close, "Blume's is not. Everything that happened to Blume Nacht would fill another book. And were we to write about . . . all the other characters in our simple story, much ink would be spilled and many quills broken before we were done. God in Heaven knows when that will be."

Agnon goes to great lengths to highlight a sense of ambiguity and dualism: in characterization, backdrop, motivation, narrative tone, plot, motifs, structure, even syntax. For example, when Hirshl has his breakdown, rumor has it that the whole affair was staged to help Hirshl evade the impending military draft. Even Bertha Ziemlich, Hirshl's mother-in-law, perceives the situation this way — and Tsirl doesn't deny it. In the plot's background there is a suggestion, too, that a curse of madness runs in Tsirl's family, which absolves Tsirl of the blame for Hirshl's collapse. The narrator, continually sarcastic and uncompromisingly elusive, plays to the hilt the role of Master of Ambiguity: why was Hirshl so pensive and preoccupied after Blume had given him her hand in her room? "[S]omething had happened . . . and yet . . . it seemed that nothing had happened after all."

Szybusz itself is being torn in two: its conservative burgher class and the town's entire social order are threatened by strong Socialist unionizing. And with its turn-of-the-century image, Szybusz projects a dualistic character: traditional in manners and morals, it is also on the verge of modernity.

Far more than a simple storyteller, the narrator is a cultural historian, an artful raconteur, an ardent psychologizer, a knowledgeable source of the proprieties and prerogatives of Jewish law and custom, a gossip, conjecturer, a self-proclaimed truth-teller, an inventor of aphorisms, and an eyes-to-heaven, comic affirmer/denier of divine control over earthly events. (The reader may recognize aspects of Sholom Aleichem's narrators here, and indeed there is a great deal of Sholom Aleichem in this satirical comedy of manners.) The narrator functions as a glib master of ceremonies who sets the folksy tone of the novel with his homespun

diction. He also presides over what the Israeli scholar and critic Gershon Shaked has termed the novel's "orchestration of motifs": a ceaseless, blatant barrage of motifs that weaves the characters and action inextricably into an ironic design.

Halkin properly identifies Szybusz as the novel's main presence, the innocent culprit, one might say, responsible for Hirshl's dilemma. It is through a painful but ultimately effective accommodation with Szybusz that Hirshl can eventually move away from Blume, begin to love his wife, Mina, and readjust to an active existence as shopkeeper, citizen, father, and son. However, Halkin seems to be too quick to dismiss the narrator's "mock naive antimodernism," a stance he readily attributes to Agnon in general but here discounts in favor of a more defensive, conservative perspective on the part of the author. "The enemy is social disorder," Halkin states in the Afterword. What he misses, I believe, is that the narrator of *A Simple Story* is himself a Szybuszian, a wry insider/outsider who unfailingly enjoys telling Hirshl's story out of both sides of his mouth. Neither fully a comic nor a realist, the narrative figure is a satirist who pokes fun (the hilarious, farcical engagement party scene), points a finger (at Tsirl and her collaborators), and ponders the fate of the innocent victim (Blume). Had Halkin identified the novel more as a satire and its narrator, not just Agnon, more as a crafty *galitsianer*, the translation might have taken on a somewhat different mien.

A *Simple Story* is not so simple to translate. The language and diction intentionally evoke the shtetl milieu; and there are many allusions to somewhat esoteric (by current standards) holidays, prayers, customs, and rituals, as well as innumerable uses of holy-language phraseology. Halkin has done an outstanding translation: he has captured the intermittent comedy and pathos of scene and character; he has dealt judiciously, at times by paraphrase and at times by omission, with the less familiar references. (This was surely the only way to avoid adding a cumbersome glossary.)

Some aspects of the translation could have reflected more authentically the particular “flavor” of the text: the narrator’s rhythmic cadences, parallelism of syntax, the subtle nature of imitated speech, the aphoristic texture of bourgeois discourse, the artful recurrence of themes.

In shaping the central presence of the narrator, for example, Agnon often has him “speak” directly to the reader in his characteristic mimetic-parodic manner. When Hirshl and Toyber, the matchmaker, meet for the first time after the engagement, the narrator goes round the room briefly describing each individual’s thoughts. Turning to Toyber he offers coyly (in my very literal translation): “What was Toyber thinking of at that moment, who knows.” The Halkin translation reads: “[Toyber] kept his eyes shut as though meditating on something of a highly private nature.” Here the reader is deprived of the narrator’s presence, his playfulness, his ironic demureness — not to mention Agnon’s psychological insight into the matchmaker’s totally guiltless, pragmatic mentality. The example may seem minor, but the phenomenon, a kind of squelching of the narrator’s obtrusiveness, proliferates. In several instances, too, the narrator’s asides to the reader, part and parcel of the narrative act,

are set in parentheses as if given separately from the text, which is not the case in the original Hebrew.

Later in the novel another brief narrative passage is omitted altogether. “If we were to try to tell [all the conversations between Mina and her confidant, Sophia Gildenhorn],” says the narrator, “we’d never have enough time.” The omission, again, may seem insignificant; but it is peculiar, since the novel ends with the same sort of remark about Blume and her story. Again the careful design of the novel is muted.

Several religious phrases or folksy expressions need not have been deleted: Blume’s mother, “may she rest in peace,”; Hirshl’s whispered prayer, “May it be thy will . . .”; the narrator’s mock-heroic declaration, “A [divine] covenant has been forged with Szybusz”; even the not-so-esoteric Sabbath rituals of Kiddush and Havdalah — all these are omitted on seemingly arbitrary grounds.

One of the most significant ingredients of the flavor of this novel is the characters’ use of aphorism. For example, when Tsirl tries to express her sympathy for the unmitigated financial failure of Blume’s father she says, “*Lav kol adam zokhe*.” The translation, “Not everyone is fortunate,” falls flat; it misses Tsirl’s snobbish self-righteousness. The well-known

saying from Ecclesiastes, “To every thing there is a season,” is given as “Right timing is all.” Near the end of the novel, the narrator comments: “[Hirshl] had made, it would seem, his peace with the world, which could not be expected to change because of him.” The original reads something like: “The world moves in its own way, and such is the way of the world.” The phrase may be read as an imitation of Hirshl’s inner speech or as the narrator’s comment on Hirshl’s reconciliation with the unswerving ways of the Szybuszian universe.

If at times the mannerisms of the narrator are replaced by those of the translator, who tends to be somewhat too conscious of movement, too solicitous toward the reader, too Dickensian, nevertheless the translation as a whole is a work of art, crafted according to a felicitous set of translation principles. Hillel Halkin and Schocken Books are to be heartily praised for making *A Simple Story* available, at long last, to English-reading audiences, who will undoubtedly derive much pleasure from this delightfully entertaining, masterfully wrought novel. ■

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