

phrase, its earthy humor, its word-and thought-play—in short, chiseled, refined Hebrew fashions a vibrant, Yiddish-speaking world. Finally, the novel's literary modes are at once classically Hebrew and Jewish—the quotes and allusions, the images, the characters and their mores, and the various genres from the Hebrew classics: parable, anecdote, story, song, intricate poem, parody of biblical verses; and yet, concurrently, the sentient pen that manipulates, balances, and invents is influenced to a great degree by Western literary sensibility.

I. M. Lask's translation of *The Bridal Canopy* (this volume is a reissue of the 1937 edition) was a pioneering effort, the first of Agnon's major works to be published in English. While the enormity of the translator's task, the erudition required, and his fidelity to the text should not be denigrated, his version with its purposeful use of "early Quaker and seventeenth-century" prose (as Lask stated in his 1937 foreword) must be considered inadequate. To be sure, Agnon's genius does shine forth in the book; nevertheless, an English reader should not be expected to run the gantlet of a linguistic obstacle course, an imposition that the Hebrew reader is not subjected to. In addition to the often thickly textured and occasionally crenellated prose, there are no quotation marks and no new paragraphs to indicate change of speaker.

Mr. Lask's basic error was one of planning, not execution. Rightly called

the dean of Hebrew translators, he has displayed his talent in rendering Agnon, especially in the short story "Tehilla" and *In the Heart of the Seas*. Lask thought that in *The Bridal Canopy* he could use "an English style recording a period corresponding" to that of Yudel's; hence the choice of pseudo-Quaker prose. But, whereas Agnon's idiom is native to him, seventeenth-century prose is not to the translator.

What are you doing here in town, Reb Ephraim asked Reb Yudel at length. Reb Yudel took out his letter of recommendation and said, Since my daughters have attained marriageable age and I lack the wherewithal to marry them off, the Rabbi of Apta, long life to him, amen, has given me this letter to serve as my mouthpiece before our fellow Jews with their generosity worthy of the people of the God of Abraham, to stir up their hearts to my advantage and the benefit of the commandment of the Bridal Canopy.

In words that are still applicable—they might even be considered the Translator's Creed—Maimonides gave the following advice to his translator of *Guide to the Perplexed* in 1199:

The translator who proposes to render each word literally. . . . will meet with much difficulty. . . . The translator should . . . state the theme with perfect clarity in other languages . . . so that the subject be perfectly intelligible in the language into which he translates.



—Sketch by Moshe Gut, reproduced with the permission of the Cultural Department of The Israeli Foreign Ministry.

**S. Y. Agnon—"reaching for others, but himself unreachable."**

ten no autobiography—but they write things about me as if they were facts. Totally untrue things. Now I understand how history is made. Everyone writes what he pleases—or what pleases him. It's all very subjective, even when it comes to cold facts that are not matters of judgment.

"There are writers who are greatly influenced by critics and by what they say, and there others who are not. I in general am not greatly affected by my surroundings or by what is said about me. I live in the modern State of Israel, and I love it, yet I write very little about it. Everyone about me speaks modern Hebrew, yet I don't write in modern Hebrew.

"As for the symbols they find, different people will see different things. Look over there. Some will say, 'The sun is setting beneath the earth.' Others might say, 'The evening is rising from the earth.' Who is to say which one is right? They are both right. Or take the 'Alenu [the concluding prayer of each of the three daily services]. We are so familiar with it, we say it so often that we just mumble it quickly without giving it much heed. But comes Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and what happens to the poor 'Alenu? It becomes the focal point of the services. The entire congregation rises, they open the Holy Ark, and they read the 'Alenu as they prostrate themselves, and the cantor chants every single word slowly. What has changed? The 'Alenu is the same. Why suddenly all the fuss and

—JERUSALEM, ISRAEL.

**A Man Touched by God:** Shmuel Yosef Agnon was out for a stroll in the afternoon sun of Jerusalem, brilliant even in February, and he asked me to join him. There was no hint in his appearance—short stature, ruddy complexion, unobtrusive bearing—that here was a Nobel laureate. Only his luminous blue-gray eyes and sharply etched nose suggested the extraordinary.

Well known as he has been in Israel for so many years, he was surely accustomed to the rigors of fame. But had his new international recognition affected his life in any way?

"I am not a young man. The papers say I am seventy-eight, and I suppose they are right. For months now I have been doing nothing but giving interviews and greeting well-wishers. This is my first walk in a long time. The prize gave me much honor, but it is an honor wrapped in much trouble. From morning to evening they come to my door—professors, neighbors, students. Can I say no to them? Tourists come with their children, ask me to step out-

side and pose with them. They snap a picture and they disappear. I am trying to do my work, I am trying to answer all my mail, but I will need twenty years just for that." Abruptly he turned to me and said rather briskly, "Well, what can I do for you?"

Off guard, I chose the wrong question: why had he changed his name to Agnon many years ago, and did this have any connection with the title of one of his early stories, "'Agunot," which means alone, bereft, isolated? "Yes, there is a connection," he said, and walked along silently, obviously unwilling to elaborate.

I turned to his craft. Does he deliberately write in the symbols and metaphors which the critics see in his work; does he in fact read the critics at all?

"Critics say many things, but I want you to know that I don't read the critics. First of all, I certainly don't read the foreign critics, because I don't know their language. And even in Israel I tend to ignore them. Critics are not always reliable. I've never been one to give out details of my life—I have writ-

bother? The answer is that we are different on those days. Take different attitudes and different approaches, and the same words mean different things. Especially in Hebrew. Every word has thousands of shades and nuances. Whatever a man sees in my writing, if he has a trained mind and an attuned heart, that is in my writing." And then, almost as an afterthought, he added with a smile, "The word that God puts into my mouth, that do I speak."

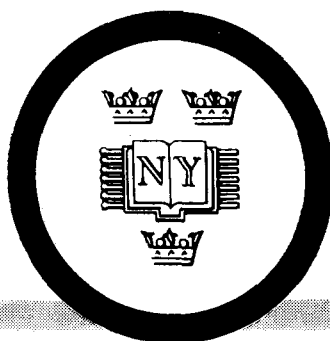
Agnon knows the Bible too well not to be aware of the undertones of this last remark: it is a quotation from Numbers 27:38, and is uttered by the heathen prophet Balaam. This is a typical Agnonism and reveals his mastery of original sources as well as his sense of irony about himself. Although the world makes much of his ability to call easily upon the resources of the Bible, Agnon exemplifies many Jews for whom the Bible and its accompanying literature have since childhood been natural components of daily vocabulary. Perhaps it is in the puckish quality with which Agnon clothes the source material that part of his uniqueness lies. Later, when I asked his son about his father's constant utilization in his stories of the supernatural, he replied, "You must understand that my father has a fine gift of laughter." It may be that the key to much of the dark mystery surrounding Agnon's use of metaphor and allegory is precisely in his ability to poke fun at himself and at the world around him, which in his eyes contains no border between the mysterious and the ordinary, and where there is, in Musil's phrase, "a sliding away of boundaries."

From Agnon's front steps, incidentally, one can almost reach out and touch the desolate hills across the Israel-Jordan boundary line. Every so often he would stop short, touch my arm, point to the hills and say, "Look, just look," and we would stare across the border at the softly rounded slopes brooding in the strange yellow light of the afternoon sun. I thought of Leah Luria in his "The Betrothed," who is so deeply moved by the sight of the moon on the sea that she can only call out, "Girls, girls, just look! Look!"

How does one put into another language the subtle rhythms and cadences, the artlessness, the archaic tone, the radiance and lyricism of a prose that is really poetry? Did Agnon think he could be adequately translated or understood by anyone who was not oriented in the nuances of Jewish life and learning?

He smiled. "The Nobel Prize committee members do not read Hebrew, they were not brought up in Judaism, they do not study Talmud. But apparently this did not bother them."

"I will tell you. I don't know French, yet I read Flaubert in translation and



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appreciate him. I don't know Russian, yet I read Dostoevsky in translation and appreciate him. Certain aspects of writing are evident even in a translation. I can take any story, in any translation, read any two lines and know if it's trash or worth reading further. I don't think Edmund Wilson knows Hebrew, but a long time ago he proposed me for the Nobel Prize."

Agnon looked up at the sky. "Come, it grows dark and you must be getting cold. Let us go to my house." I protested that I had already taken enough of his time. "No, no. It's chilly and you must have a cup of tea before you go." He guided me up an unpaved street to an old pleasant-looking cottage surrounded by an iron fence. He carefully scraped his shoes on the concrete walk. "My wife has no helper, and when I come in with mud all over my shoes I just cause her extra work."

Inside, Mrs. Agnon was darning his socks at the dining-room table. "Get him a cup of tea right away, my dear. The poor man is freezing." Dainty and graceful even in her seventies, she nodded knowingly and disappeared into the kitchen.

"She is a good woman for putting up with me. I am a totally disorganized person. I save every scrap of paper; my workroom is always a shambles. There

is no *seder*, no order in my life—even in normal times. And now I get fifty letters a day, and I try to answer them all. Each one took the trouble to write me. Shouldn't he get a reply?"

"Nelly Sachs has sent me everything—books, manuscripts, poems. She is a kind soul. I have sent her nothing yet, I've been so busy. But she has been busy too. My son helps me a little. He is an engineer so he should be a little more orderly than I am."

"It is interesting. People keep telling me, 'Agnon, you are the glory of all Israel.' Why am I the glory of all Israel? Because the nations now approve of me?"

I asked permission to take a snapshot of him. "Go right ahead." As the camera snapped he said playfully, "Not good; you'd better take it again. My eyes blinked." Was he twitting me? I wasn't quite sure but I took it again. "Pictures," he said, "pictures, the whole world is pictures. What is it about a picture that is so fascinating?"

He rose suddenly from his chair. "You must excuse me for a moment. It's practically nightfall and I've almost forgotten about Mincha [the afternoon prayer]." He went into the next room. Agnon adheres scrupulously to such traditional practices as blessings before and after meals, morning and evening worship,

strict observance of sabbaths, holy days, and dietary laws. While he goes about these duties in a natural and unostentatious way, they are not merely perfunctory acts but part of an intricate pattern of a life that is pervaded by the past.

For example, when asked what he considers his greatest literary achievements, he likes to reply, "*Yamin Noraim* and *Atem Re-item* [*Days of Awe* and *Ye Have Seen*] plus some additional tales and novels." Each of these books is a compilation of ancient homilies and anecdotes, one based on the High Holidays and the other on the Sinaitic Revelation. For Agnon to select these anthologies as his best work may be, as some have suggested, a whimsical joke on his public, but it is more likely that it underscores his preoccupation with the tradition.

In view of all this, would Agnon classify himself as a religious writer? The answer seems obvious, but he evades it: "I am a writer. I do not need labels." What is clear is that he is far from being the simple man of simple faith he tries to project. The European Jewish holocaust and the apparent hiddenness of God left their mark on him and his art: his Galician town of Buczacz, so endemic to his work, is the *Everyshetl* whose caftans and earlocks went up in smoke—and only Sinai (God reaching down to man) and the Days of Awe (man reaching up to God) remain intact. This may account for the classic Agnon character who embodies, in Edmund Wilson's phrase, "the granting and withholding of divine grace."

Agnon himself is the prototype of this ambivalence. On the one hand is his anguished awareness of a God who is able to withdraw from the affairs of men; on the other, despite his air of a man who does not take himself too seriously, is his apparent view of himself as having been touched by this God. In his Nobel acceptance speech he claims to be "of the lineage of the Prophet Samuel." He continues:

In a vision of the night I saw myself standing with my brother Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel. . . . The angels in charge of the Shrine of Music . . . made me forget by day what I had sung by night, for if my brethren were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enabled me to compose songs in writing.

This is poetry, but his phrase "the words that God puts into my mouth" is apparently more than banter.

The alternately hiding and speaking God is part of the complexity of Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Perhaps this is why he is open and innocent, yet elusive and mel-

# THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT

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ancholy; congenial and friendly, yet lonely and brooding; gentle, but capable of a sharp retort; reaching for others, but himself unreachable. His friend Professor Gershom Scholem describes Agnon's frequent conversations with others as "actually walls guarding his loneliness."

Agnon calls to mind his own story "Tranquillity," in which the just and God-fearing neighbor of Moses asks the lawgiver to do him a personal favor when he goes up to Sinai: would he kindly ask the Lord to grant him a little tranquillity? Moses promises to do what he can. After his mission is done, Moses puts in a good word for his neighbor. And God replies: "Son of Amram, everything that I created, I created during the first six days; but tranquillity I did not create." Agnon is that restless neighbor, still searching for that which he alone must create. —EMANUEL FELDMAN.

Emanuel Feldman, currently on leave to teach at Bar Ilan University in Israel, is rabbi of Congregation Beth Jacob in Atlanta, Ga.



**Angst on the Autobahn:** The lack of subtlety and the pseudo-realism in Agnar Mykle's new book, *Rubicon*, translated from the Norwegian by Maurice Michael (Dutton, \$4.95), is exemplified by this brief passage:

The man gave a quick smile, a shy and slightly twisted smile, and then in impeccable Norwegian said: "Yes."

Mykle tends to the hyperbole when he strives to depict actuality. The main character, the twenty-three-year-old Valemon Cristvåg, is introduced in an unlikely scene at the German-Danish border in June 1939, and followed on a trip by motorcycle to Paris. He shudders, has chills, is terrified, and turns pale throughout the narrative. He crosses not one but many Rubicons, all of which have about the same breadth and depth, although they represent decisions as different as whether to flee Norway after a shotgun marriage or to eat a piece of rare beef in a *prix-fixe* restaurant. Time and again Mykle undertakes to build up suspense, but succeeds principally in creating a series of false cadences.

The author's intent has been to portray *Angst* through a series of recollections that release complex associations in the mind of the hero. The technique is commendable; but the situations Valemon remembers are supposedly real rather than psychological interpretations of experience. As a result the reader is disappointed, even though he recognizes that Mykle has considerable talent in working with words, as evidenced by

striking images scattered throughout his prose and especially by the two-page "1939 Overture," an original and clever conversation among a group of musical instruments written in German. Flashes of originality do not counterbalance the cyclopedic filler with which Mykle has extended his novel: remarks on the language controversy in Norway, observations on Norwegian geography and folk life, and even the lamely allegorical précis of a tale from the Younger Edda.

In an earlier novel Mykle walked the brambly path between art on the one side and pornography and blasphemy on the other. As a result he became involved with the law and acquired a name on the literary scene. He may subsequently have overlooked the fact that while a new esthetic in imaginative literature can elevate what hitherto has seemed bold and daring, boldness is no guarantee of a new esthetic. There are a few scenes in *Rubicon* which would have been considered piquant and overly frank only a decade ago, but they will not raise many eyebrows in antepill 1967. They certainly do not suffice as the book's *raison d'être*.

—P. M. MITCHELL.



**No Company:** On the opening page of William Sansom's *Goodbye* (New American Library, \$5.50) Anthony Lyle, an executive in the bond department of a London bank, learns that his wife is leaving him after eighteen years of marriage. Incredulous at first, and expecting her to stay, Lyle stumbles about looking for sympathy. When the split proves to be permanent, he becomes by turns sour, resentful, and falsely buoyant; but he feels most often the pangs of wounded self-regard. His wife, determined to avoid a noisy scene, is finally angered into a venomous monologue explaining her decision:

"To me you're nothing, absolutely nothing. I don't hate you, I don't even dislike you. I just don't feel anything about you. And who in God's reasonable name wants to go on living side by side with a nothing? It's no company."

Confirmed in his hopelessness, Lyle strikes back with a maniacal scheme designed to end in double death by poison.

Except for a lunatic disorder at the close, much of the material in *Goodbye* is drawn from the familiar repertoire of recent urban comedy. At a dinner party people are exposed by the nullity of their conversation; at a neighbor's house the injured husband hopes for consolation but gets instead a catalogue of the other fellow's love life. As his desperation increases Lyle becomes childish, irrit-

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