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A Multi-Disciplinary Curriculum, Bibliographies, and Selected Syllabi

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INTERTEXTUAL AND INTERLINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO AGNON'S WRITING

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While previous critics have raised the question of outside influences upon Agnon, his fiction has seldom been read in connection with contemporary views of intertextuality. Agnon specialists might learn from the theories of Harold Bloom, for example, as they are set forth in The Anxiety of Influence and A Map of Misreading.[1] This article will provide specific examples of intertextual and interlinguistic reading, applied to Agnon's "Panim Aherot" and "L'Veit Abba", and suggest the broader significance of these approaches.

Bloom deals primarily with the English Romantic poets, employing the language of psychoanalysis and rhetoric to characterize their textual strategies. He takes for granted that the Romantic poets suffer from a sense of belatedness, of having come too late. Everything seems to have been done before, and only strong 'misreading' - for every act of writing interprets previous writing - enables the poet to clear imaginative space for something that appears new. According to Bloom's scenario, the writer follows his seminal precursor or precursors up to a certain point, and swerves away. The ego's mechanisms of defense find expression, then, through a variety of figurative turns. In short, Bloom conceives the literary domain as a battlefield, and

points to the scars, the verbal distortions and denials, that attest to a formative struggle for greatness. Only by coming to terms with prior tradition can the writer achieve prominence. The rhetorical critic may prefer to minimize study of oedipal dynamics, in order to emphasize the textual level on which authors prove their independence.

The Bloomian schema requires modification before it can be applied to Agnon, whose 'anxiety of influence' responds to more than one coherent literary tradition. Agnon simultaneously confronts current European trends and the entire corpus of Hebrew (and Aramaic, and Yiddish) writing. Using a crude, organic metaphor, one might say that Agnon grafts modern Hebrew writing onto the tree of European fiction. Agnon would have been the first to reject this image, however, for he sought to assert his own priority - and that of Hebrew. Unlike the Romantic poets, then, in his writings Agnon does not necessarily combat specific forerunners. Instead, he dramatizes a battle between two competing traditions. Agnon strives to continue the line of biblical and rabbinic writing, even as he employs European forms such as the novel, and contents such as those taken from German culture.[2]

As Agnon wouuld have it, his stories employ narrative conventions that run from the Bible to R. Nahman, or from Midrash to the Ma'aseh Book. Although we, too, may be tempted to assert the autonomy of Jewish literary traditions, on closer analysis they almost always reveal significant links to non-Judaic

sources. Hence a tension plays itself out repeatedly, in the creativity of a 'strong misreader' such as Agnon. He allows glimpses of his precursors to appear, but only as a prelude to renouncing them and asserting his self-reliance. I will argue that, in the case of Agnon, this striving for originality involves massive repudiation of an entire linguistic form and literary corpus: German language and literature.

The dynamics of representation and repression are strikingly present in the classic story "Panim Aherot". While Agnon writes a high literary Hebrew, his story is set in early twentieth-century Germany. The only city or place mentioned by name is, in fact, Berlin. Even this single geographical detail remains indefinite, however, because it occurs within a dream Hartmann tells Toni. The issue arises: How can a modern Hebrew story assimilate references to Europe and European languages? Germanic elements intrude as foreign strands in the perfectly woven Semitic fabric. At one point, irritated by the fact that he has forgotten to shave, Hartmann actually mutters the German phrase: "Ausgerechnet heute."[3] The problem for Agnon's narrative is to appropriate its European context, and to control this extrinsic reference within the Hebrew framework. The difficulty is most evident when one considers the characters' names in this story.

The names in "Panim Aherot" follow a sharp gender distinction. Men have Germanic names: Hartmann, Tenzer, Suessenstein. (Svirsh is perhaps Slavic, but Svirsky is a Swedish-Jewish name.) Women have Latinate or Italian names: Toni, Renata, Beata.

Understandably, because the setting seems to be Germany, no Hebrew proper names occur. Yet Agnon's protagonist gives expression to Agnon's own antagonism. Outraged by Dr. Tenzer's dance, his way of running after what belongs to others, Hartmann creatively misreads and interprets his name. "Dr. Ten-tsar," he calls him, slicing the name into seemingly Semitic components (466/120). When we perceive the initial tet in Tenzer as the tav in the verb natan, the supposed healer shows his true colors, as one who produces narrowness or (with the addition of an ayin) gives pain (ten tza'ar). In short, Tenzer is a trouble-maker. Employing a rather midrashic device, Agnon's hero reveals a Hebraic subtext that lies concealed in the German name. On a grander scale, Agnon insists on the Hebrew origins that underlie his own rather Germanic (not to say Kafkaesque) fictions. Thus Agnon insists on his own priority, together with that of Hebrew, by mis-taking a German signifier for a Hebrew phrase.

"Le Veit Abba" also alludes to Berlin, despite its apparent setting in Galicia. As the first-person narrator arrives at his father's town on Passover, he approaches a synagogue to pray. Suddenly he has a surreal encounter with Isaac Euchel, the long-dead maskil from Berlin.[4] In seeking his ancestral roots, the narrator chances upon the origins of modern Hebrew. Euchel, of course, was a founder of the early Hebrew journal, Ha-Meassef. One might say that the story dramatically represents its author's search for a literary identity. In doing so, it also suggests his agonistic struggle to gain prominence over the past.

Euchel appears as another of the vain commentators who merely rephrase prior views in more complicated terms. Initially, Agnon displaces the problem of belatedness onto the commentator. He subsequently attempts to outdo his precursor, specifically in the realm of language. When Euchel wishes to light his cigarette, which Agnon calls a tsigareta, the narrator observes: "You, with all your expertise in grammar, did not know how to to cloak this splinter [i.e. match] in a suitable word such as gafrur" (104/62). Euchel then employs the coinage, yet he calls the gafrur a gafrir. In spite of his own inability to master such new vocabulary, Euchel criticizes the present generation: "What is the use of a gafrir that goes out before it performs its mission?" Twentieth-century speakers of Hebrew may know a few more words, but their words describe empty, futile realities. Agnon's narrator concludes this section of his story on a note of pathos: "Alas, I tried to conquer and I found myself conquered." The Enlightenment glows brighter than modernity.

In relationship to German and German-Jewish traditions, then, Agnon's stories do suggest an 'anxiety of influence'. Agnon sought to steer a course between contemporary European literature and Judaic models; he neither imitated directly nor entirely severed his ties with the forerunners. While one could draw attention to the psychological drama of this situation, the linguistic drama is even more to the point.

Agnon surely knew that Euchel himself wrote a linguistic drama called Reb Henoch, oder vos tut me demit (c. 1792), the sub-plot

of which concerns the tensions between Yiddish, Hebrew, and German. Such tensions are inherent in the Yiddish language, then commonly referred to as Jargon, and are especially salient for enlightened, German-Jewish authors. Yiddish intrinsically embodies a complex relationship between Hebraic and Germanic elements; this is occasionally also true of modern Hebrew writing, especially when its setting or style is Germanic.[5]

To teach Agnon intertextually, then, is also to teach the interlinguistic drama that is enacted beneath the surface of the plot. Of course, this is one of the least translatable aspects of Agnon's fictions, and the instructor must painstakingly explain what has been lost in translation. Scholars of Yiddish fiction are familiar with the interactions between Germanic and Semitic vocabulary. The Hebrew reader needs to work harder to recognize the subtle battle between linguistic levels in the texts of Agnon.

Interpreters of Agnon may well speak of his 'anxiety of influence', which found paramount expression in his denial that he had read Kafka. Agnon's disavowals merely reflect the intensity of his agon. Nevertheless, it is not always necessary to trace specific intertextual influences or evasions. The creative tensions in Agnon's fiction find masterful expression on the linguistic level, revolving around the relationship between leshon kodesh, mameh-loshn, and the languages of the nations. Agnon's mastery enables him to dominate the interlinguistic drama, and to suppress his powerful precursors.

1. Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), and A Map of Misreading (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

2. Concerning Agnon's uneasy relationship to the novelistic form, see Dan Miron's "Domesticating a Foreign Genre: Agnon's Transactions with the Novel," tr. Naomi B. Sokoloff, Prooftexts 7 (1987): 1-27.

3. "Ausgerechnet Deutsch," one might add. See "Panim Aherot", in Kol Sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1952), vol. 3, p. 450. In English, see "Metamorphosis", in S.Y. Agnon, Twenty-One Stories, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1970), p. 113. Henceforth cited by page alone, according to the pagination of the Hebrew edition, followed by that of the English translation.

4. See "LeVeit Abba", in Kol Sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon, vol. 6, p. 104. In English, see "To Father's House", in Twenty-One Stories, pp. 61-62. Henceforth cited by page alone, according to the pagination of the Hebrew edition, followed by that of the English translation.

5. Compare Avraham Holtz's remark: "In order to understand Agnon's Hebrew ... the translator has to go back to the Yiddish." See Modern Hebrew Literature in English Translation, ed. Leon I. Yudkin (New York: Markus Wiener, 1987), p. 25.