

A SIMPLE STORY
S. Y. AGNON

A NEWLY REVISED TRANSLATION
FROM THE HEBREW
AND AFTERWORD BY

Hillel Halkin

INCLUDING A NEW PREFACE
AND AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY BY
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The Toby Press

Preface to *The Toby Press S.Y. Agnon*
Library Edition
Agnon Agonistes

“And yet, though [Hirshl] was only sixteen years old, he was old enough to know that life was no idyll. There were those who claimed that the whole problem with the world was its being divided into the rich and the poor. Indeed, that was a problem. Certainly, though, it was not the main one. *The main problem was that everything came about with so much pain.*”

– *A Simple Story*, chapter I

“Sometimes it is actually those people who were hurt who show us how to elevate life. A man who has suffered ... can be the source of feelings and thoughts that rise from the depths of the soul. The sidelines of society are no less important than the social center. And I would add: feelings and thoughts can crystallize on the sidelines, whereas the center, because of its tendency toward what is average and moderate, would reject them.”

– Aharon Appelfeld, *A Table for One: Under the Light of Jerusalem* (The Toby Press, 2005), p. 105

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I FIRST ENCOUNTERED AGNON'S *A SIMPLE STORY*, in Hillel Halkin's masterful translation, as a college student nursing the wounds of a profound heartbreak at the end of a long adolescent romance. Working with Halkin in preparing this revised translation, now some twenty-five years later, gave me an opportunity to share with him this bit of autobiographical trivia, which aroused a cynical laugh on his part – "I bet reading about Hirshl Hurwitz's travails gave you little comfort – *the realization that you'll just get over it!*"

Actually, at the time, the novel's power was precisely in its ability to fan the flames of heartache, and I now realize how much my initial reading of the novel differed from Halkin's, as expressed over a working lunch in his hometown of Zichron Ya'akov and in this volume's Afterword. Indeed, Robert Alter's *New York Times* review of the original edition suggested that there is "more *irresolution* in the novel than Mr. Halkin suggests, that to that end Agnon makes us aware of the terrible price Hirshl pays for his final normality."

But as Agnon pointed out, "Any book not worth reading twice probably wasn't worth reading the first time," and repeated readings of this very complex "simple" story have produced profitable insights to love and loss, pain and profundity of "feelings and thoughts that rise from the depths of the soul" (in Appelfeld's phrase). One does not read *A Simple Story* the same way in his forties that he did in his thirties – and certainly not as he did in his sophomore twenties. I can only presume that readings in future decades will continue to bring new insight, but at this stage of mid-life I have grown more receptive to Halkin's interpretation.

However, one of the novel's central motifs that has consistently drawn my attention is the presence of books and reading as a source of succor to varieties of anguish. This was a lifelong theme that occupied Agnon, from recollections of his first childhood composition, through the themes he struck in the 1966 Nobel Prize acceptance speech: His engagement with writing as a response to tragedy, from a small boy yearning for his absent father, to the nation of Israel banished from its Land yearning for its Father in Heaven. Recalling that he was a member of the caste of Levites, whose job in the Jerusalem Temple was to sing the sweet songs of King David's Psalms, he felt compensated

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by being able to “compose ‘songs’ in writing,” i.e., to be a modern Hebrew author, in place of singing in the Temple. That is, he told the audience in Stockholm, he could now compose in prose what was formerly sung in praise. Words and language, and the books, stories and novels produced by them, become a form of spiritual consolation – for both the individual reader, and metaphorically-midrashically for the nation as a whole.

As you make your way through *A Simple Story* (and I envy you if it’s your maiden voyage) be mindful of the presence of books and the act of reading as depicted in the novel. The significance of Agnon’s meta-artistic reflections on writing and reading should not be underestimated. Towards novel’s end, ponder the unconventional treatment (at any stage in the history of psychotherapy) administered in Dr. Langsam’s sanatorium, where books are prescribed, and medicines administered only to differentiate the work of the good doctor from that of Hasidic Rebbes.

Consider poor old Hayyim Nacht’s relationship with books, practically all he has in the world, and his words to young Blume, “I know that I won’t be leaving you any riches, but at least I’ll have taught you how to read a book. No matter how black your life may be, you can always find a better one in books.” Today, at Jerusalem’s Agnon House, this quote adorns bookmarks and other knickknacks for sale in the gift shop. On its surface it’s a beautiful encapsulation of the power of books. But I sometimes wonder if visitors fathom the ironic sense of the quote. It was, after all, such novels that drove the late Mrs. Langsam to suicide, and which now make up the bookshelf qua medicine cabinet of her widower. (Dan Miron’s seminal Hebrew essay on the character of Langsam is entitled “The Doctor in Need of a Cure”!)

For Nacht’s advice is only partially correct, and Blume – practical Blume, who, after all, we never get to fully know in these pages – doesn’t completely buy into her father’s bibliophilic naiveté. The point of reading, Agnon may be telling us, is not to escape our world, finding a better one in books, but to live better in our own world after we’ve returned to it.

While it’s never spelled out precisely how, Langsam’s treatment helps Hirshl overcome the madness of his heartbreak, and come to

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terms with his life – that of a middle-class, bourgeois shopkeeper in an arranged marriage, who recognizes that there are worse things in the world, and realizes that “you’ll just get over it”. It was certainly beyond Agnon to conclude any novel “happily ever after” – in fact, this un-simple story doesn’t even end with The End, as you are about to discover. For in the Agnonian conception that’s not the high calling of literature. Literature is not to tell us they lived happily ever after. Rather, it’s to help us look at the world that we live in and think about it in a less “simple” way.

Jeffrey Saks
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Annotated Bibliography of Works in English on Agnon's A Simple Story

In the nearly eighty years since its first publication in Hebrew, Agnon's *Sippur Pashut* (*A Simple Story*) has been the object of sustained fascination for literary critics. Readers who would like to sample some of that body of scholarship and commentary, but are limited to material available in English, would find the following book chapters and essays to be worthwhile.

1. Book-length studies on Agnon with chapters on *A Simple Story*

Each of these books in English aims to be comprehensive in its treatment of Agnon's stories and themes, and each includes a chapter on A Simple Story (indicated by page citations). Those interested in exploring the entire canon of literature on Agnon's writings would do well to start with these volumes:

- Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968),

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pp. 239-254 – this nearly encyclopedic volume remains the most essential book on Agnon in English.

- Harold Fisch, *S.Y. Agnon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1975), chapter 7, pp. 85-96 – on the sources of the “simple” story’s metaphysical resonance and depth.
- Baruch Hochman, *The Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), chapter 4, pp. 77-111 – survey essay, placing *A Simple Story* within the context of other Agnon tales set in the world of Szybusz-Buczacz; attention to Dr. Langsam and his treatment of Hirshl.
- Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), pp. 130-136 – on the surrender of the romantic dream.

2. Book chapters

- Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), chapter 9, pp. 134-153 – *A Simple Story* as an exemplar of Agnon’s psychological realism.
- Nitza Ben-Dov, *Agnon’s Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 73-106 – chap. 4 on Hirshl’s dream sequence; chapter 5 on the “interminable song of the blind beggar” at the novel’s conclusion.
- Amos Oz, *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon’s Fear of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), chapter 3, pp. 31-60 – a controversial book by Israel’s leading contemporary novelist, which dedicates one of its three chapters to exploring religious themes and conflict in *A Simple Story*.
- Astrid Popien, “Tirtza and Hirshl in Germany: S.Y. Agnon’s *In the Prime of Her Life* and *A Simple Story* in the Context of the Family

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Novel in European Realism” in *Agnon and Germany: The Presence of the German World in the Writings of S.Y. Agnon*, edited by Hans-Jürgen Becker and Hillel Weiss (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010), pp. 115-150 – on Agnon’s “realistic family novels” as adaptations and ironic transformations of the European model (as exemplified by Theodor Fontane and Thomas Mann).

3. Journal essays

- David Aberbach, “Beggars of Love: Flaubert and Agnon,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 7:2 (July 2008), pp. 157-174 – explores the obvious influence of Flaubert on Agnon, especially *Madame Bovary* on *A Simple Story*.
- Nitza Ben-Dov, “Discriminated Occasions and Discrete Conflicts in Agnon’s *A Simple Story*,” *Prooftexts* 9:3 (1989), pp. 213-227 – on Tsirl Hurvitz as an assertive “Jewish mother” of a submissive son.
- William Cutter, “Figurative Language in Agnon’s *Sippur Pashut*,” *Prooftexts* 1:3 (1981), pp. 311-315 – exploration of the novel through its use of simile and metaphor.
- William Cutter, “Setting as a Feature of Ambiguity in S.Y. Agnon’s *Sipur Pashut*,” *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 15:3 (1974), pp. 66-80 – on the culture, values and mores of Szybucz, i.e. Agnon’s Galician town of Buczacz, as a setting for the novel.

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- Hillel Halkin, “On Translating *Sippur Pashut*” in *Agnon: Texts and Contexts in English Translation*, edited by Leon A. Yudkin (New York: The International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization, 1988), pp. 107-136 – reflections by this volume’s translator on the challenges he faced in creating a readable English text while staying faithful to the spirit of the Hebrew novel.