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SALVAGE POETICS: S.Y. AGNON'S A GUEST FOR THE NIGHT^d

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Writing Culture

In their now-classic anthology, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford and George E. Marcus focus on “the making of ethnographic texts” and look “critically at one of the principal things ethnographers do—that is, write.”² Clifford and Marcus’s landmark collection is focused on how culture is inscribed in language; every field study written as the result of a course of ethnographic observation and study, must be considered, first and foremost, as a text. Around the same time that anthropologists sought to understand the role of literary consciousness in the writings of ethnographies, literary scholars were looking for anthropological tools to use in order to extrapolate culture from literature. The “New Historicism” of the 1980s and 1990s, for example, drew from ethnographic terminology in order to lend credence to literary criticism’s own quest to wed the practice of close reading to historical and cultural breadth.³ Thus, literary texts, with the help of ethnographic discourse, were deemed “artifacts” or “thick descriptions” of particular cultures.

In a recent attempt to understand post-Holocaust readings of pre-Holocaust Yiddish and Hebrew literature as a form of popular ethnography, I invited Billie Jean Isbell, a practicing ethnographer from Cornell University, to deliver a lecture at the University of Maryland. Entitled “Anthropology’s Return to Fiction,”⁴ her talk consisted primarily of reading from a didactic novel she is writing about the culture of transgendered children, a topic she addresses in her current ethnographic fieldwork.⁵ Her theoretical interests, to the extent that her interests venture into the theoretical domain, are centered on practicing ethnographers who write fiction in order to further popular access to their research. But what of fiction that is received as a witness to a culture, or a “description” thereof, in an “ethnographic” vein, but is not written by anthropologists?

After years of struggling to find an ethnographic treatment of the ways in which certain bodies of literature are read by popular audiences as a form of ethnography, I now realize that it is up to literary scholars to identify, document, and analyze a particular poetics that lends itself to popular ethnograph-

ic reception. I have coined the term "salvage poetics" to acknowledge the historical circumstances which motivate the kind of composition and reception which lead to a work of fiction being understood in a popular ethnographic vein. While "salvage" reflects the attempt to preserve something that is either in the process of disappearing, or is said to have already done so, "poetics" gestures towards the fundamentally literary nature of the "salvage" work.

My own formulation of "salvage poetics," particularly within the context of post-Holocaust reception of arts, draws upon the natural commingling of the disciplines of anthropology and literary analysis at the end of the twentieth century in order to better describe and approximate the blurring of the boundaries between pre-Holocaust aesthetic production as an ethnographically valuable enterprise and as an artistic one. The concept of "salvage poetics" presented here is conceived partly in keeping with the notion of "ethnopoetry," as introduced in 1908 by author and ethnographer Semyon Ansky (also known as Semyon Akimovitch or Solomon Rappaport.) In his ethnographic expedition from 1912 to 1914, inspired by the contemporary Russian ethnographic movement, one of Ansky's stated goals was to collect Jewish folk art and folk artifacts in order to "salvage" them for posterity.⁶ To this end, Ansky recruited artists and writers to serve as staff for his expedition in the Pale of Settlement so they could re-inscribe artifacts of Jewish life (melodies, idioms, stories, etc.) in a uniquely modern Jewish art, thereby salvaging them, but more importantly, rendering contemporary Jewish aesthetic works more authentically "Jewish" because of the presence of "folk forms" within them.⁷

This understanding of "salvage," forged of an ethnographic consciousness but not governed by its scientific methodologies, distinguishes "salvage poetics" in a literary sense, from "salvage ethnography" as an anthropological science. Thus, works of salvage poetics, for purposes of the present discussion, are imaginative works that strive to balance an impulse to document with an impulse to create. They document a world in a variety of different self-conscious ways that foreground their own artistry, while inviting popular ethnographic reception.

Yiorgos Anagnostu theorizes the relationship between the professional ethnographer and the popular ethnographer in American culture. In "Meta-ethnography in the Age of Popular Folklore," he poses the question: "what happens when popular folklore inundates social life? And what is at stake when both the professional folklorist and the untrained ethnographer find themselves immersed in an ethos of 'generalized ethnography?'"⁸ Further illuminating discourse about the crossover between popular and scientific ethnographic projects, Jean Bazin says, "everyone participates as his neighbor's ethnographer, representing the other's identity in terms of typical behavior. With everyone becoming someone else's native, modern (or postmodern) society must itself become a space of ethnographic inscription."⁹

One type of text generated within a "generalized" "space of ethnographic inscription" is what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called a "hybrid genre." In an essay on "the popular arts of American Jewish ethnography," she points in particular to Maurice Samuel's 1943 *The World of Sholem Aleichem*, a gloss on

pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jewry based on the fiction of Sholem Rabinowitz (1859–1916), or “Sholem Aleichem.” “In *The World of Sholem Aleichem*,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett says, “Samuel fashioned a hybrid genre that mediates between literature and ethnography, between retelling the Tevye stories and providing an ethnographic gloss on them.”¹⁰

The proposition and characterization of a “salvage poetics” here is an initial attempt to treat, from a literary perspective, the implicit marriage between literary and ethnographic discourses posed by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in her identification of a hybrid genre. What I explore in this essay is not the question of how ethnographers feel about the popular ethnographic reception of Hebrew and Yiddish fictional works authored throughout the twentieth century, but how Hebrew and Yiddish writers fit into the ethos of “generalized ethnography,” described by Anagnostou, and how modern Jewish culture creates a “space of ethnographic inscription” that facilitates the production of “hybrid genres.” Whereas Anagnostou explores the intersection between anthropological texts and folkloric explorations generated by non-professionals, in this study what interests me is the creation of a “salvage poetic” in texts of a distinctly fictional nature. Shmuel Y. Agnon’s *Oreach Nata la-lun* or *A Guest for the Night* (1939) will serve as a case study of modern Jewish salvage poetics.

The World as Text

The “salvage poetic” evident in Agnon’s *A Guest for the Night* can be understood in a uniquely intertextual light. I point this out because it is important to emphasize the necessity, in any analysis of salvage poetics, to focus on the formal aspects of the documentary impulse, to take style into consideration when attempting to discern what makes a literary text uniquely “salvage” oriented. In Agnon’s *A Guest for the Night*, texts and textuality stand at the intersection of the ethnographic and the literary. Published on the eve of World War II, but documenting the devastating impact of World War I on Jewish Galicia, *A Guest for the Night* represents the decline of Torah study as a metonym for the very real cultural attrition experienced by the Jewish community of Galicia between the wars. Modern Jewish texts frequently engage in a presentation of nineteenth-century East European Jewry as a world not simply devoted to texts, but constituted by them. Traditional Jewish texts within modern literary works thus represent traditional Jewish society metonymically and are read by popular audiences as an ethnographic précis of a culture.

The classic example of a text that turns Jewish culture into the figure of a book, thus facilitating the representation of the culture as a text itself, can be found in Abraham Joshua Heschel’s *The Earth is the Lord’s*.¹¹ Heschel’s essay, first delivered as an oral address at the YIVO Institute’s 1945 annual conference, not only focuses on the scholarly world of traditional Judaism as if it were pervasive in all strata of society, it also deploys a conceit of textuality, which presents the culture itself as a text. Heschel, for example, calls *shtetlakh* “sacred texts opened before the eyes of God, so close were their houses of

worship to Mount Sinai.”¹² He observes: “Yet the Jews did not feel themselves to be the People of the Book. They did not feel that they possessed the Book, just as one does not feel that one possesses life. The book, the Torah, was their essence, just as they, the Jews, were the essence of the Torah.”¹³

Like Heschel in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Agnon views post-cataclysmic Jewry in light of Jewish texts. Though published on the eve of World War II, indeed within days of the start of the war, Agnon's novel is an explicit response to World War I.¹⁴ What is of interest here is the way in which Agnon, focused on depiction of the Eastern European Jewish world in the aftermath of a major war, deploys a textual thematic and an intertextual poetic designed to “salvage” a culture in decline. The particular form of “salvage” evident here posits the text as the culture itself, and therefore is not to be understood as a practical attempt to document or preserve particular texts. Rather, the sacred text is used as a conceit for a culture and as a model for future modes of representation that exist on the border of the ethnographic and the imaginative. For Agnon in *A Guest for the Night*, the intertextual salvage poetic is played out in a presentation of two textual institutions: one physical and one rhetorical. The physical institution is the old *bet ha-midrash*, or house of study, and the rhetorical institution is the *dvar torah*, or sermon.

The *bet ha-midrash*: A Home for the Text

In *A Guest for the Night*, the *bet ha-midrash* is no longer a significant part of Szibusz (the Galician hometown to which the narrator and protagonist return) for most of its inhabitants. Since World War I, the interest in Torah study, the culture of prayer and scholarship, has diminished and nearly disappeared. But what the protagonist manages to do is to re-inhabit the place that defined the life of the town for him as a child, to reanimate it for himself, and to use it as a base for his engagement with the rest of the town. From the *bet ha-midrash* in Szibusz he is able, as well, to forge a relationship with Hanoch, the emblem of loss as the story unfolds. He is able to establish a relationship with Reb Hayim, an exemplum of humility and former splendor — an unrivaled Torah scholar and community agitator in the years before the war who is taken prisoner while doing his army service during the war years and who returns to Szibusz a broken man. In fact, Reb Hayim claims to no longer have any knowledge of the scholarship that made his reputation during his early years. When Hanoch, the wood gatherer for the *bet ha-midrash*, vanishes with his horse, Reb Hayim takes over the job of collecting wood. Each man, in turn — the simple-minded, kindly Hanoch, and the brilliant but traumatized Reb Hayim — acts as the wood gatherer and the sexton for the *bet ha-midrash*, assisting the narrator in his rehabilitation of that institution, symbolically rebuilding the *bet ha-midrash* with their wood and actually repopulating it by heating it and attracting impoverished townspeople to it during winter.

Newly repopulated, a prayer quorum is formed in the *bet ha-midrash*, and people again begin, alongside the narrator, to study the sacred texts therein contained. Reb Hayim helps Hanoch's widow feed her children, and even

teaches the children to pray, both the kaddish in their father's memory, and other prayers that Hanoch, simple as he was, was unable to teach them during his lifetime. At the end of the novel, Reb Hayim passes away as well. Therefore the two major figures circling the narrator/protagonist in *A Guest for the Night*, Hanoch and Reb Hayim, who enable the protagonist to imagine the continuing viability of the *bet ha-midrash*, are removed from the story as it progresses. For Agnon's narrator, Hanoch and Reb Hayim serve as proof of the reality of his memory of childhood and the truth of his memory of the town. Both help him to bring the *bet ha-midrash* back to life, at least for the winter. But with their deaths, and with the narrator's departure from the town, it becomes apparent that the narrator's sense of the real was only imagined, that his Szibusz is not the Szibusz of the present and cannot be brought back to life, even in the imagination of its native son.

The very name Szibusz (a clever play on Agnon's native Buczacz, in Hebrew) means a textual elision or bastardization that has been preserved and canonized. The narrator's memory of Szibusz is, in itself, a bastardization of the real thing, but it is all that will remain, it seems, when committed to posterity by the narrator-turned-author, in a crucial moment of homodiegetic revelation:

Against my will I have mentioned that I am an author [*sofer*.] Indeed, the nomenclature of authorship [in Hebrew] comes from the notion of a "scribe" [*sofer*] of the words of Torah [*divre torah*.] Yet, since they call all authors now, "sofrim" I do not hesitate to call myself an author.¹⁵

Here, the sacred *sofer* evolves into the modern *sofer*, just as the narrator becomes an author. In so doing, he memorializes Szibusz by textual means, through writing about it, but also through writing it in its own traditional idiom, through the words of the Torah, or in the form of a "*dvar torah*." His exchange of one kind of authorship for another in his confession as an author can be understood as an engagement with the notion of modern authorship as a variation on a different kind of authorial tradition in Judaism—the composition and delivery of sermons, or *divre torah*. His *divre torah*, therefore, throughout the novel, are a confession of authorship which demands that we consider authorship as an oral institution even in modern times, and not strictly in textual terms. Here the narrator synthesizes two senses of authorship into one—drawing upon the traditional Jewish author as "*sofer*" of *divre torah* and the modern "*sofer*" as a literary author—thus not simply preserving, but improving upon, the traditional institution of *divre torah* through the transcription of an oral performance. As in Ansky's statement about his quest to mobilize native Jewish art forms in the production of a modern Jewish art, there is an element of preservation and mobilization that must be taken into consideration in salvage poetics. How does one use one's literary (or other) art to mobilize, improve upon, and preserve a culture that is in rapid decline?

In the two discrete sermons presented below, Agnon pursues the subject of "houses" or "homes." "Houses" as the theme of this *dvar torah* function telling within the culture of the novel and within the culture of modern Jewish

salvage poetics. As discussed earlier, Agnon, throughout the novel, presents Jewish textual culture as the culture to which his protagonist returns from the Land of Israel in the years following the destruction wreaked on the Jewish communities of Galicia after World War I. He does not find many familiar personages or familiar homes in his hometown. In fact, he has nowhere to spend the first night of Passover. But he finds comfort, familiarity, sustenance, and purpose in his rejuvenation of the old *bet ha-midrash*. Similarly, in the very act of preaching to his fellow townsmen, he reintegrates into their consciousness an awareness of those texts that, to his mind, defined his childhood, and his memory of the town, which they continue to inhabit. In other words, he is trying to reintegrate his townsmen into the horizon of his town as he remembers it, through words of Torah and institutions thereof—through the old *bet ha-midrash* and the *dvar torah*. Thus the *bet ha-midrash* on the one hand, and the *dvar torah* on the other hand, a physical repository of Jewish texts, and a rhetorical repository of the same, represent the home to which Agnon's protagonist is trying to return.

The Sermon: At Home in the Text

The unnamed protagonist and narrator of *A Guest for the Night* not only takes on the physical rehabilitation of the *bet ha-midrash*, but also the role of spiritual guide, or "preacher." Invited to give a sermon in the *bet ha-midrash* by the men who join him there on a winter Shabbat evening, he presents the sermon lucidly, virtually anatomizing it for us as he proceeds. The first paragraph begins:

I opened a Pentateuch, and I glossed the weekly Torah reading, beginning with the verse "And Jacob awoke from his sleep,"¹⁶ and he was afraid and he said, "how terrible this place is. This must be a house of God."¹⁷ This is not like Abraham who said "God will appear on a mountain,"¹⁸ or like Isaac, of whom it is said, "And Isaac went walking in a field."¹⁹ Rather, Jacob emphasizes the house. And so I sermonized about three methods for worshipping God. The first is the man who seeks out God in high places, or highfalutin ways, like on a mountain, and goes through his life with lofty ideas and intentions. The second is the man who seeks out God as in a field, for the way of a field is to plant seeds in it, and to harvest them, and there is a good scent there, as it says, "see, the scent of my children is like the scent of a field."²⁰ The third, which is God's favorite, is to approach him as one would approach a house, as it is written in the case of Jacob our father, God's favorite among the forefathers. He blesses himself and praises himself saying, "my house is a house of prayer."²¹ As it written in the Zohar: A mountain and a field are places of freedom, but a house is a guarded, respectable place.²²

The narrator then proceeds to discuss three periods in the history of Israel as understood metaphorically through an engagement with the three concepts just introduced: mountains, fields, and houses. First, there was a period when the sages imagined that we don't need houses or fields. Rather, Jews

should lift their eyes toward the mountains, as it says in Psalms: "I lift my eyes toward the mountains,"²³ because mountains represent freedom and nothing is more beneficial than, or as desirable as, freedom. During the second period, the field is valued over the mountain, as it says, "and she went out to the field to ask after her father."²⁴ The third time, the time we are now living in, when we are exhausted from wandering up and down mountains, and across fields, is a time of houses, where we find rest. The merit of the three forefathers can be found in the nature of the three exiles: Abraham redeemed us from Egypt, Isaac redeemed us from Babylonia, and Jacob will redeem us from our present exile. We should most aspire to emulate Jacob: "the house of Jacob, let us go and walk in the light of God."²⁵ And Jacob said, "and I will return in peace to my father's house," and of him it is said, "and God will be my Lord."²⁶

Throughout this discourse, Agnon's narrator brings a series of prooftexts, and maintains a simple structure of triads: Three forefathers, three locales, three exiles. Each of the triads invokes other triads within it: (Abraham = mountain = Egyptian exile) (Isaac = fields = Babylonian exile) (Jacob = house = contemporary exile). The preacher/narrator begins his sermon with a text from the Bible and ends with an allusion to the present moment, wending his way through a variety of texts from the Bible and Prophets, and even venturing into a Kabbalistic text rendered entirely in Aramaic.

The triumph of the "house" over the other two locales woven through the sermon is an allusion to the general theme, throughout the novel, of the narrator as a "guest for the night" in his own hometown. His physical house has been destroyed in Arab riots in Jerusalem, and his wife (called a man's "house" in the Talmud), and children (or "builders" of houses) have gone to Germany to be with his in-laws. For his part, the narrator has returned to his own hometown, but has no home to speak of because his own immediate family is gone, and most of the people he once knew were killed in World War I, have died of old age or grief, or have emigrated. He returns, time and again, to the notion of his own homelessness, of his having no home to return to in his chosen Palestine, and no home to inhabit in Szibusz. He creates a home for himself in the *bet ha-midrash*, not a home to merely dwell in, because he never really dwells there, but a home to study in, to teach in, and to eat in when his innkeeper's wife, Mrs. Sommer, is too distracted to cook for him. His notion of a home, therefore, is a place of texts, a place of textual traditions, and a place of community. By inserting this, and other fully fleshed-out sermons into his novel Agnon not only furthers his thematic in a variety of different ways, but he also salvages a mode of discourse, in this case, the homiletical sermon.

Elsewhere in *A Guest for the Night*, Agnon delivers a sermon in a slightly different style, with a similar thematic. Once spring has set in, the narrator finds that his rejuvenation of the old *bet ha-midrash* as a house of study and prayer has not withstood the test of the seasons. In the winter, when there was a fire blazing in the grate, it was not hard to attract a daily prayer quorum of ten men, a *minyán*, and even bring in some students of the Talmud. But with spring, the narrator cannot seem to get the required quorum of men for prayers, even on the Sabbath. On one particular Friday night, the narrator

sits in the old *bet ha-midrash*, waiting for an audience to hear his gloss on the weekly Torah portion. Three men sit with him, yawning by the stove:

I perused my book, and cocked my ears to hear if people were coming. Half an hour passed and no one arrived. I said to myself, why don't the people who are sitting here ask me to teach them? Now, even if they ask, I won't answer them. Because they were quiet I said to myself: "if two people sit together and they share words of Torah, the holy spirit hovers between them. Whether there are many people or few, words of Torah must be spoken. Even if only one of them wants to hear words of Torah, it is forbidden to keep them from him. While I was talking to myself, they slipped away. This man felt strange with a bellyful of Scripture verses and sayings from the sages, and no one wishing to hear them. Moreover, on other Sabbaths I did not prepare anything, but whatever God put in my mouth I would speak, and for this Sabbath I had prepared many comments..."²⁷

So the narrator decides to recite the *dvar torah* to himself, before he leaves the empty *bet ha-midrash*. It begins, like the previous *dvar torah*, as a transcription of an actual rhetorical performance:

The portion for that week was the one beginning: "these are the regulations of the Tabernacle,"²⁸ and what I wanted to say was connected with the last verse of the portion: "For the cloud of the Lord was upon the Tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night, in the eyes of all the House of Israel, throughout their journeys."²⁹ We should be precise in interpreting "In the eyes of all the House of Israel" —do houses have eyes? And what does Rashi of blessed memory want to teach us, when he explains that the journey also includes the places where they encamped? And I went back to the verse "And the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle, for the glory of the Lord was not mingled with the cloud."³⁰ Then I went back to the beginning of the portion, "These are the regulations of the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle of Testimony." Why was the Tabernacle mentioned twice? Because in this passage they were told that the Tabernacle was destined to be destroyed twice: the First Temple and the Second Temple. And we may ask: Was it for the Holy One, blessed be He, at this moment, when Israel had joy and gladness, to inform them of such an evil thing? But this is explained by the word that follows: "Testimony."³¹ It is a testimony to all the people of the world that there is forgiveness for Israel, and these are the tidings. Since the Lord poured out his wrath on the wood and the stones, but Israel remained in existence, we learn that the Tabernacle, which in Hebrew is *mishkan* —was Israel's pledge—in Hebrew *mashkon*; and that is why it is written, "The Tabernacle of Testimony" for it was a testimony and a pledge for Israel. And these are ancient matters.³²

After one or two more points, based on close readings of the Tabernacle texts, the narrator begins to summarize his method and his message, instead of presenting a transcript of the sermon: "Finally I went back to the beginning and explained a number of scriptural texts about which I raised questions, and touched on a number of topical ideas which are already implied in our eternal Torah."³³

What we see here in Agnon's approach to this sermon is twofold. First, as in the earlier sermon, he presents a biblical verse as his starting point, and, as in the earlier sermon, he focuses on the theme of a "house." Unlike the earlier sermon, what he models for us here is a gloss not on the Bible, but on Rashi, a medieval commentator and the most important and most frequently studied rabbinic voice on the Torah and the Talmud, who interprets the biblical verse in a way that seems strange to Agnon's narrator. From Rashi's interpretation that the cloud's accompaniment of the children of Israel on all their journeys includes all the places that they encamped, he arrives at the conclusion that "encampment" is an allegory for the historical future of the children of Israel—that God's glory will accompany them on their journeys, even into future destructions and exiles. The tabernacle with which the cloud is associated in the starting verse of the sermon becomes a figure for the destroyed first and second temple.

Once this is clearly articulated, with a concluding note on the notion of the tabernacle being a tabernacle of testimony (*mishkan edut*), an institution that testifies to God's forgiveness of the Jewish people because God allowed the destruction of the physical temples but the survival of the Jewish people, Agnon shifts into a more summary mode of sermonizing. The transcription becomes an overview, and the sermon is no longer a mimetic performance in the text, but a diegetic description.

The earlier sermon, delivered to a group of interested congregants in the *bet ha-midrash* on a different Shabbat evening, during the winter, is transcribed from beginning to end. We are told that that sermon was delivered upon request by those who had gathered in the *bet ha-midrash* for the evening prayers, and this marks the first time the narrator takes on the role of preacher and teacher within the context of the *bet ha-midrash*, of which he is now the proud possessor of the key. At this juncture, his role as keeper of the key is defined, at least for him. He is not simply a janitor, a gatekeeper, or a hanger-on. He is to foster a return of the *bet ha-midrash* to its former intellectual glory, overseeing, or at least facilitating, the scholarship that can still be pursued there because the books have remained. All that is missing are the people to study the books, and the encouragement to do so.

The second sermon, in contrast, delivered to an empty *bet ha-midrash*, is a cross between performance and meditation, with the first half being a performance, and the second half a meditation. Or even more poignantly, the first half exemplifies the role of the narrator as a character in the novel, and the second half reminds us that he is a narrator whose omniscience drives the novel even when he is not an actor in the story. In other words, the homodiegetic nature of the narrative, in which the narrator serves as a character as well, is emphasized because we are presented with a sermon delivered both mimetically and diegetically.

Auto-ethnography and A Space of Ethnographic Inscription

In an overview of ethnographers' narrative styles, and specifically their use of fictional norms, against the backdrop of the changing nature of the

ethnographic discipline,³⁴ Barbara Tedlock introduces us to a paradox, eloquently described by Paul Rabinow, who says that "as graduate students we are told that anthropology equals experience: you are not an anthropologist until you have the experience of doing it. But when one returns from the field, the opposite immediately applies: anthropology is not the experiences which made you an initiate, but only the objective data you have brought back."³⁵ One way of overcoming this dilemma, according to Tedlock, can be seen in a trend toward publishing the fieldwork experience in the form of a novel. This enabled ethnographers to distance themselves from their work through the use of omniscient narrators, and pseudonyms, while still maintaining an engaging rhetorical style and an intimate perspective. Tedlock sites examples of this practice dating as far back as 1947.³⁶

The practice of fictionalizing fieldwork as indistinguishable from the observations of an anonymous narrative consciousness became suspect in the post-colonial and postmodern moment of the late twentieth century. Coinciding with the "writing culture" project represented by Clifford and Marcus's volume, the narrators of ethnographic texts became situated, and in the language of narratology, homodiegetically present. They played a role in the story, drew attention to themselves in it, even while serving as the story's authorizing consciousness. This became most fully developed in a fascinating smattering of what Tedlock has called "auto-ethnographic" texts. Martin Yang's 1945 ethnography *A Chinese Village* exemplifies the "auto-ethnographic" methodology in that Yang's field research was done in the village in which he grew up. As he puts it, "my fieldwork was my own life and the lives of others in which I had an active part."³⁷ This is not to say that, like Yang, Agnon was a practicing anthropologist basing his "fieldwork" on his own ethnic heritage and/or geographic origins. Rather, Agnon's construction of an authorial narrator who is both inside and outside the culture he represents in writing, a returning native son who no longer belongs to the culture of Szibusz, renders his novel a cousin of the auto-ethnographic novels described by Tedlock.

Critics have discussed the figure of the narrator in this novel, emphasizing the autobiographical nature of the "return" described therein, as Agnon returned to Buczacz in 1930, even if, as Dan Laor argues, for a much shorter time than the year described in the book.³⁸ Arnold Band rightly warns his readers not to assume that there is too close a correspondence between the author Agnon and the unnamed narrator of *A Guest for the Night* even if at selected moments the narrator reminds us that he is an author.³⁹ Agnon plays here with his readership by insisting on not naming his narrator, by having the narrator share with himself many biographical details, and most importantly, by having his narrator, as he does in the second sermon, control both the mimetic and the diegetic levels of the story. If he is both performing the sermon and anatomizing the sermon, if he is both inside the institution being represented, and outside of it, representing it, it is harder to distinguish Agnon the author from the authorial narrator presented in his novel. Posing as the author himself, Agnon's narrator emphasizes more than just the "realism" of the novel. His seemingly autobiographical presence in the novel, and his isolation

within the culture he thought he would be revisiting on familiar terms, makes the narrator a kind of participant observer and auto-ethnographic writer.

But why understand Agnon's poetic in necessarily ethnographic terms? Indeed, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures written in the first half of the twentieth century, most notably in the work of writers such as Agnon and Peretz, is the way in which they retold "folk tales" in dramatically modern, and even modernist ways. Ansky's assessment of this literary style would be that it is a form of "ethnopoetics," or an attempt to preserve traditional forms in a modern disguise. Within the contemporary field of Jewish folklore, Dan Ben Amos and Aliza Shinhar have both analyzed Agnon's fiction with an eye towards his deployment of folkloristic motifs and styles.⁴⁰

A Guest for the Night, however, demonstrates a different kind of folk consciousness, or a different form of ethnographic consciousness than the ones facilitated by Ansky, or analyzed by Shinhar and Ben Amos. Highly conscious of its own poetic impulses as the justification and frame for a salvage instinct, in recent years Agnon's novel has become an ethnographically valuable text within the "space of ethnographic inscription," forged among Jews in the post-Holocaust era. Agnon's is a "hybrid" text, bridging two moments: one of historical decline after World War I and one of cataclysmic destruction during World War II. Depicting the aftermath of one war, and published on the threshold of another, Agnon's *A Guest for the Night* beautifully exemplifies the delicate balance between production and reception that is typical of a "salvage poetic" text, baring its device of a documentary impulse through the strongly ethnographic reception it receives.

Endnotes

- 1 This essay is part of a larger project defining and documenting "salvage poetics" in fictional, photographic, and memoiristic works about Eastern European life throughout the twentieth century. It is tentatively called "Salvage Poetics: Twentieth Century Jewish Literature and Photography." In it I look at the works of Hebrew novelists David Grossman and S.Y. Agnon; early-twentieth-century photographers of Eastern European Jews, Roman Vishniac and Alter Kacyzne; and little-known Eastern European-born women who wrote memoirs in Hebrew in Israel, such as Ita Kalish, Malka Shapiro, and others.
- 2 *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds., James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.)
- 3 Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.)
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- 29 *Exodus* 40:38.
- 30 *Exodus* 40:34.
- 31 *Exodus* 38:21.

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