

Buczacz by Way of Newark: On Literary Lives at the End

By Jeffrey Saks

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By now we've absorbed the news that celebrated author Philip Roth, nearing 80, has laid down his pen. A New York Times **piece** on his exit said that Roth, once accustomed to write standing at a lectern, now has a Post-it Note on his computer announcing that "the struggle with writing is over." But Roth's retirement is also an occasion to reflect more generally on the "sense of an ending" in literary careers. Not every great author has gone out like Roth. The great Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon, for one, provides an instructive counterpoint.

Roth was the great Jewish writer whose books informed my youth in a certain way. He was nearly two generations older than I; and his descriptions of adolescence, sexuality, and the Jewish-American experience didn't have much autobiographical resonance with me. But **Goodbye, Columbus** was pushed on me by my mother, who grew up some years behind Roth in the Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey, a once vibrant shtetl of Americanized Jewish life, which serves as the setting for most of his novels. By the time I was a child (having been born just two years after the 1967 riots that shook the city), "white flight" had emptied Weequahic of its Jews. On a nostalgic car drive through the alte heim in the 1980s, for which my more genteel suburban-raised father insisted that we lock the doors and windows, all that remained were churches occupying old synagogue buildings, still bearing Stars of David in their masonry. The flavor of the Newark of my mother's childhood—and her parents, grandparents, even some of the generation before that, her whole large family of cousins and aunts and uncles with names like Muggie and Sonny and Nechu and Niggy—was transmitted to me through Roth. (Family legend had it that a particular ruffian in one novel was modeled after my grandfather, the son of a bootlegger and suspected horse thief.)

My transformation from a suburban, assimilated fourth-generation American Jew to an Orthodox rabbi and educator living in Israel may partly explain the progression of my literary tastes. Nowadays I'm mindful of Gershom Scholem's assertion that **Portnoy's Complaint** is bad for the Jews; not for nothing did he compare it to The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Still, it was Roth's retirement announcement that led me to recall a remarkable description of an author much closer to my heart these past few years, the only Nobel laureate in Hebrew letters, S.Y. Agnon. Like my Newark forebears—and like Roth—Agnon (1887-1970) was a witty Galician; but instead of heading west for the American pastoral, he arrived in Palestine in 1908, where he remained, except for a 12-year sojourn in Germany, throughout his life.

Agnon's writing captures an older Jewish world and the shock and "nightmare" that occurred as that world was confronted by modernity. He does so by reaching back through the bedrock sources of rabbinic Judaism to a civilization older still, distilling the language and lore of the Mishnah, Talmud, and midrash, together with medievalists and Hasidic masters, and recasting them as modern literature.

Just before his death, Agnon, by then the most famous literary man in Israel's history, was visited by Aharon Appelfeld, then a young author. Appelfeld—out of sync with his 1960s literary contemporaries, who were busy chronicling the Sabra experience—had spent the war years as a child hiding in the Ukrainian forest and, like Agnon, was still writing of the Old World. In a late-night meeting, which proved to be their final conversation before Agnon's death, the older man greeted Appelfeld disarmed of his usual "arsenal of irony." As Appelfeld recalls in his memoir, **The Story of a Life**, "He tried to explain to me what my parents had not been able to tell me and what I wasn't able to

learn during the war years.” What Agnon said was, “Every writer needs to have a city of his own, a river of his own, and streets of his own.”

Agnon told Appelfeld that he had been “thinking a great deal about his father and his mother” and that if he had time, “he would have gone back and told their story in a completely different way.” But this effort “would have required considerable energy, which he no longer had. In previous years he had been able”—like Roth—“to stand at his lectern and write for hours, but this was now hard for him.”

Yet for Agnon, unlike Roth, retirement was never an option. An inveterate reviser of his works, he lay in his hospital bed instructing his daughter on the ordering of chapters of unfinished novels even after a stroke robbed him of his speech in the months before his death. Indeed, during his final years, when most of Israel thought he’d given up writing, Agnon was reconstructing the “city of his own” that he had urged on Appelfeld, composing the stories that would become *Ir U’m’loah* (“The City and the Fullness Thereof”), the monumental (in both senses) posthumous collection of tales of his native Buczac. “I am building a city!” he confided to Baruch Kurzweil.

Many authors colonize literary neighborhoods, towns, and shtetls, of course, both those with real-world antecedents and those built solely with the bricks of imagination. Comparing Agnon and Roth probably reveals more about my journeys as a Jew and a reader than about them as writers. But isn’t immersion in literature meant precisely as a catalyst for self-reflection?

“That evening,” Appelfeld concludes, Agnon “felt that it was important for me to learn where I had come from and where I had to go.” Reading of the city Roth built with his books, my mother’s city, helped me understand my origins. Reading Agnon, though, showed me that Newark was not really a starting point but merely a way-station, a place to visit as a guest for the night.

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