Literature, History, Choice

Literature, History, Choice: The Principle of Alternative History in Literature (S.Y. Agnon, The City with All That is Therein)

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To my dear parents Sofia and Vladimir Katsman

The servant said, “Those who think that the evildoers who die are sent down into hell do not know that there is a punishment that is harsher than being in hell. What is it? It is the hollow of the sling. It is not the one mentioned in books, that is the name of a place, but it is agonizing, named after the action, because one perishes there in the agony of torture of the sins. And the sinner seeks shelter from the tortures of agony in hell. When he arrives at the opening of hell, they shoot him to the place where he sinned and to places where he thought of committing sins. He goes and does not find these places, since they were transformed by the sins, and those places that did not change are spread under his legs and are filled with pitfalls.”

—S.Y. Agnon, “The Parable and the Moral,” *The City with All That Is Therein*

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PREFACE

What if Hitler had won World War II? What if Hamlet had killed Claudius as the latter prayed? Although the first question is related to history and the second to literature, both create alternative histories, historiographical and literary. Books, essays, and movies in the genre of alternative history represent a course of events that could have happened had certain historical developments turned out differently. The questions about Hitler and Hamlet differ not only in their subject but also in one even more fundamental respect, as the first ignores the problem of a personality's possibility to choose, while for the second question this possibility is the heart of the matter. In this study I shall argue that choice is the essence of alternative history and of literature in general. The idea and intuition of historical alternative guide writing and reading the literature.

The back-and-forth movement of thought, from the impossible in the present to the possible in the past or future and back, creates historical alternativeness. Here past and future are nothing but narrative concepts of possibilities that have not been realized in perceptible reality. However, an alternative arises not as a concept but as a story, a myth of a purpose's realization. In this way, philosophical, historical, and literary thinking creates alternative history as a significant mode of theorization in the midst of a crisis, which is permanent because no possibility is fully realized, or even realizable, in the present. Alternative history thus appears as a task for thought and discourse, for writing and reading, for memory and vision, and, in general, for any creative act.

In literature, the "possible" world represented in the text, be it even most fantastic, utopian, and supernatural, is already a realized experience, and therefore is not a true possibility. A true alternative history is never already written, but is always occurring anew in the reading, against the background of the actually written story. True historical alternativeness has to be sought not in the genre of alternative history but beyond it, in the process of literary experience itself, which consists of searching for new myths and identities, for new hesitations, choices, and decisions. All these can be found in the moments of crisis represented in the realized, written story. The purpose of the theory and practice of alternative history is thus to identify those moments as historical junctions, bifurcation points, and to

intensify the oscillation of choosing in them, in order to make the possibilities true and the choices free. In this manner the dialectical nature of literature can be justified as unconstrained-ethical, traditional-revolutionary, memory-visionary power. Consequently, alternative history as a principle resists both deterministic and relativistic worldviews, and remains a truly non-dogmatic and non-ideological metaphysical historiography.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1887-1970) was a true author of such historiography in all his works, early and late, surrealistic and pious, fairytale and novelistic. The most exciting and provocative feature of his writing is the implied creation of historical alternatives *in* what is written in his stories and *to* what is written in other stories and in the books of history. The core of Agnon's poetical historiography is not the dichotomy of the overt and covert, realistic and fantastic, or realistic and meta-realistic, but the dialectics of historical alternativeness as unrealized possibility of the written. Agnon's alternative history must be read, and this can be done after understanding that historical alternativeness is a metaphysical way of thinking, writing, and reading in the midst of crisis.

This is the purpose of the following study, one that cannot be accomplished better than by a reading of Agnon's most historiographical book – *The City with All That Is Therein (Ir u-mloa)*. The stories collected in the book were written by a mature Agnon over a period of 1950s-1960s, but they all have one objective in common: to create a possible, though unrealized and perhaps unrealizable, alternative to the realized but impossible history – the history of the city of his birth Buchach burning in the flames of the Holocaust.

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INTRODUCTION

The essence of literature may lie in presenting history as a problem, but this is not necessarily and exclusively connected to either postmodernism or to postmodernist irony.[1] We would rather say that literature empathically creates an *alternative* to history, be it the history of an individual, or of a community or nation. Except for a few figures, such as Lubomír Doležel in his recent book, and Fredric Jameson in some of his essays,[2] neither sociological nor psychological or narratological research, dominant in modern criticism, has succeeded to adequately describe this essence, which is also the main content of literature. The equation of historiography and narrative or literature, as in Arthur Danto's analytical philosophy of history,[3] or in Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit's school, could not obviously represent the literary problematization of history and historical knowledge (which was excluded from the discussion) but only of historiography, and, moreover, only of its positive and objective nature. And of course, the result of this highly sophisticated intellectual tendency has been the vulgar and extreme relativism of history itself (with or without quotation marks).[4] On the other hand, the failure of Marxist readings teaches us one thing: a disregard for the history of a unique personality leads to scientific and ethical barrenness, due to the overwhelming determinism, whether overt or covert, that is characteristic of such readings. Karl Popper called this weakness "the poverty of

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[1] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London, Routledge, 1988, pp. 87-103.

[2] Lubomír Doležel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010; Fredric Jameson, "History and Salvation in Philip K. Dick," in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London, Verso, 2005, pp. 363-383.

[3] Arthur Danto, "Analytical Philosophy of History," in *Narration and Knowledge*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 27-33.

[4] The storm of the "narrative turn" triggered by Hayden White's *Metahistory* has not abated until today. See numerous collections, such as: Kuisma Korhonen, ed., *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2006; Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domanska, Hans Kellner, eds., *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2009.

historicism."[5] Neo-Marxist cultural criticism completed this development by depriving the individual personality of what remained of its freedom of choice within history, and its freedom to choose its history. Yet it is precisely freedom, in the sense of historical indeterminism, that was and remains an existential foundation for the survival and evolution of every society, and especially of every cultural enterprise. Even today the theory has not yet been freed from the pathological suspicion that arose in the 1920s, and later in 1950s and 1960s, when scientific problematization was replaced by political mistrust. Although we have passed a long way, to this day we still use the tools that were honed in that period. Following Roland Barthes, we still suspect myth of ideological fraud, and following Gilles Deleuze, we still accuse the language of conspiring against the people and attribute revolutionary or anti-revolutionary aspirations to literature. As though we never descended from the barricades of 1968, we confuse ethics with politics, and emancipation with terror.

These are not the only confusions from which we suffer. In theory of history, open-ended learned hermeneutics has been replaced by "radical open-ended democracy," "free-play," "radical otherness"; even Hayden White's "successful representation" has been reduced to "always failed representations."[6] We also confuse nation-community with nation-state. It is not enough to distinguish between nationalism and modernity, and between nationhood and the nation-state, as Adrian Hastings did in his polemics against Eric Hobsbawm.[7] One should remember, too, that the study of nationalism, be it of Ernest Gelner's or of Benedict Anderson's kind, deals with only a few aspects of community life. Quite exceptionally, Liah Greenfeld proposes a multifaceted vision of the "nationalism-and-culture" problem, while emphasizing a personality's mental activity, art,

[5] David N. Myers observes that radical and "revolutionary" historicism, viewed as a combination of fragmentation, relativism, and naturalism which distorts our perception of the human condition, was detected and criticized already in the 1920s by Ernst Troeltsch and other Protestant thinkers (David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 1-3). Karl Popper himself set against the historicist determinism (and relativism) his theory of "propensities" – the inclination of possibilities (inherent in generating conditions) to be realized (Karl Popper, *A World of Propensities*, Bristol, Thoemmes, 1990). The concept of propensity presents an occurrence of any event as the realization of one of a number of alternatives.

[6] Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline*, London and New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 5.

[7] Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

and creative imagination.[8] Indeed, in addition to nationalistic imagination, somehow always suspect and accused of aggressiveness, there are also the imaginations of sanctity and righteousness, love and beauty, motherhood and childhood, pedagogy and leisure, and above all – the imagination of a free individual's creative historical deed. But when nationalism is reduced, in Edward Said's manner, to colonialism, and when the nation is reduced, in Homi Bhabha's manner, to narration, everything becomes politically determined, and no room remains for a history of a personality.

However, the "age of suspicion"[9] reaches its limit in the age of trust. This implies, first of all, trust in the existence of a unique individual personality and faith in its desire and ability to freely choose its history. At the theoretical level this means that we must overcome the belief in historicist determinism. It has become clear by now that approaches such as hermeneutics, phenomenology, and deconstruction agree on at least one thing: a literary text is never considered *written*; it is in a continual state of *being written*. This, in turn, means that history is always being created anew, not in institutions and ideologies, but by unique living people, who choose and learn how to choose. These people err, learn again, and choose again. History's openness, its "never-yet-written" character guarantees the freedom of the personality (not the freedom of indoctrinating reasoning). Such freedom is not total chaos, since at least one history is always already written and given. Without this metaphysical givenness, without the belief in truth and proof,[10] no new writing can be possible or is even needed. The personality is thus meant to search for itself and to choose itself by way of creating an alternative to the already written history. The search for alternatives constitutes the essence of a text's creation as the origination of history and of the personality. This is the search for "possible worlds,"[11]

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[8] See especially: Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism and the Mind: Essays on Modern Culture*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2006.

[9] Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion*, New York, Braziller, 1990.

[10] See: Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof*, Hanover NH, Brandeis University Press, 1999. Geoffrey R. Elton, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

[11] Doležel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage*; Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994. For the philosophical discussion of "possible worlds" issue see: Raymond Bradley and Norman Swartz, *Possible Worlds: An Introduction to Logic and Its Philosophy*, Oxford, Hackett Pub., 1979. The exceptionally useful collection that includes works of the prominent American philosophers of the possible is: Michael J. Loux, ed., *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1979.

which is inherent not only in "the postmodern condition." On the contrary, as Fredric Jameson writes, in reference to Philip Dick's oeuvre, postmodernism may even "occlude" the thinking of alternative history.[12]

Overcoming determinism is not free of risk: in negating determinism there is always the danger of falling into negativism or even nihilism. We must understand that negating determinism in and of itself means a negation of negation, as it were, and should be expected to take the form of an affirmative procedure. For this reason the main concept in this study will be that of *alternativeness* – a special type of the modal logic, philosophy and pragmatics,[13] as a positive antithesis to determinism or, more precisely, to its vulgar superficiality and one-sidedness.

Mikhail Epstein, a preeminent student of postmodern culture and literature, created a philosophy of the possible as a "category of humanistic thought (covering metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and psychology)" that is in no way negativistic, nor postmodern in the narrow meaning of the word. Epstein places his "possibilism" at an equal distance from both the philosophy of realism and the philosophy of nominalism:

> The "possible" for me is not a certain reality possessing its physical extension or spatiotemporal continuum [as in realism]. However, the "possible" is not also a provisional fiction symbolically reflecting characteristics of our real world [as in nominalism]. The possible is a special mode of "being able" that takes us beyond the boundaries of this reality, but not necessarily belongs to another reality. Peculiarity of the

[12] "Dick's historico-temporal perspective here constitutes a whole new way of thinking about time and history and a kind of method or organon for approaching these phenomena, which the atmospheric conditions of postmodernity seem increasingly to occlude and to render intangible and unutilizable"; [driven by "nostalgia for the present," Dick's hero escapes] into the alternate dreamtime of another History and another present" (Jameson, "History and Salvation in Philip K. Dick," pp. 380-383).

[13] See: David Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1973; Alan R. White, *Modal Thinking,* Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1975; Robert Stalnaker, *Ways a World Might Be: Metaphysical and Anti-Metaphysical Essays*, Oxford, Clarendon, 2003. In this context, see also the philosophy and rhetoric of contingency, such as in Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989). A special case of modal thinking is Algirdas Greimas' modal semantics-semiotics (*On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987), to which we will turn in Chapter 7.

> possible consists in none other but its *irreducibility to the real*, whether it be the reality of our world or of other ones.[14]

Later on, we will return to this book by Epstein; however, let us point out that we consider the alternativeness as a certain manifestation of that very "mode of being able" that cannot be reduced to the real, of which Epstein speaks (a manifestation that is ethical in its essence – the ability to choose anew). On the other hand, however, from the viewpoint of the alternativeness, this "irreducibility" does not mean "unrelatedness": no alternative history could exist without a realized alternative – whether it be a realized history, literary plot or character. Epstein differentiates between "universalia" – "inclusive possibility that materializes in multiple real objects," and "alternatives" – "exclusive possibilities, of which only one can be materialized. […] Universalias and alternatives constitute two principal axes of the Universe: the world of essences and the world of events."[15] We will view the both.

The positive facet of historical alternativeness in literature can be seen in the genre of alternative history, which belongs to fantasy literature and cinematography. It is a non-canonical genre, singularly fertile in recent decades, not sufficiently appreciated by the academic world, yet, as scholars note, "even" great writers have occasionally created works in it. While the present study is not about the genre of alternative history itself, but rather about *the principle of alternativeness* which can be extracted from it, we will begin with a short introduction into it, outlining the course of our argumentation, and then gradually proceed to formulating of the main issue of this work.

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Over the last twenty years, the research into alternative history literature – a sub-genre of fantasy literature based on an unreal hypothetical historical premise – has grown significantly. Alternative or counterfactual history[16] envisages how history could have unfolded had events developed

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[14] Mikhail Epstein, *Filosofiia vozmozhnogo. Modal'nosti v myshlenii i kul'ture (The Philosophy of the Possible: Modalities in Thinking and Cultrure*), S-Petersburg, Aleteia, 2001, pp. 27-32.

[15] Ibid., p. 66.

[16] "Counterfactual thinking" may be presented as a method introduced by Max Weber for the needs of "singular causal analysis" of historical events: in order to assess whether one event really caused the other, we should modify or remove the first one and ask whether under the new conditions the second event would be still expected ("Objective Possibility and Adequate Causation in Historical

in different directions at certain key points in time: if, for instance, the Nazis had won World War II (Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*); if, as a result of the civil war following the Russian Bolshevik revolution, an independent Crimean republic had emerged (Vasily Aksyonov's *The Island of Crimea*); or if the Roman Empire had not disintegrated (Harry Turtledove's *Agent of Byzantium*).[17] However, the research into alternative history literature, most of which is of a historiographical or poetic-descriptive nature, is still not a sufficiently comprehensive or established

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Explanation" (1905), in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. by Edward Shils and Henry Finch, Brunswick NJ, Transaction Publishers, 2011, pp. 164-188). Raymond Aron claimed that the question of the reasonable possibilities of historical events is the basis of an historical methodology (*Introduction to the Philosophy of History: An Essay on the Limits of Historical Objectivity,* London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1948). However, this method is rather controversial among historians. For the defense of it see: Martin Bunzl, "Counterfactual History: A User's Guide," *The American Historical Review* 109.3 (2004), pp. 845-858. For the opposite opinion see: Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 227-239. The most comprehensive pro-et-contra discussion of the subject is presented in: Alexander Demandt, *History That Never Happened: A Treatise on the Question, What Would Have Happened If…?*, trans. by Colin D. Thomson, 3d ed., Jefferson NC, McFarland, 1993. See also the collections of counterfactual histories: Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, New York, Basic Books, 1997; Robert Cowley, ed., *What If? The World's Most Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, New York, Putnam, 1999; *More What If? Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, New York, Putnam, 2001.

[17] One should not confuse counterfactual history with what David Biale, referring to Gershom Sholem, calls "counter-history": "I mean by this term the belief that the true history lies in a subterranean tradition that must be brought to light, much as the apocalyptic thinker decodes an ancient prophecy or as Walter Benjamin spoke of brushing history 'against the grain.' Counter-history is a type of revisionist historiography, but where the revisionist proposes a new theory or finds new facts, the counter-historian transvalues old ones. He does not deny that his predecessors' interpretation of history is correct, as does the revisionist, but he rejects the completeness of that interpretation; he affirms the existence of a 'mainstream' or 'establishment' history, but believes that the vital force lies in a secret tradition" (David Biale, *Gershom Sholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 7). Amos Funkenstein uses this term in more radical sense as "distortion of the adversary's self-image, of his identity, through the deconstruction of his memory," as turning history and memory "on its head," as a lie, arbitrariness and denial of facts in the purpose of propaganda (such as the anti-Semitic one) (Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, pp. 36-48).

discipline. Moreover, its theoretical potential has not been properly assessed or even recognized by the wider scholar community. Exception from this can be found in the "possible worlds" theory, represented by such scholars as Ruth Ronen and Marie-Laure Ryane, and first of all – by Lubomír Doležel. He has elaborated his theory of the Leibnizian kind for years, and in his recently published book he devoted a special chapter to the "counterfactual narratives of the past."[18] On the other side, Nicolas Rescher, one of the leading philosophers of the "possible," rejects the necessity of the "possible worlds" for historical counterfactual thinking and for creating "fictional worlds," and warns of the "collision of the two worlds of fact and fiction" as "one of the dangers of our age."[19]

Thus, Chapter 1 of our book is devoted to sketching a preliminary outline defining alternative history. The origins of alternative history and of the principle of alternativeness can be discovered in plant mythology[20] which is mediated by classic rhetorical tradition. The elements of alternative history are discernible both in the literature of antiquity and in modern literature. The necessary and sufficient condition of alternative history can be formulated as follows: *open realization of a possible unrealized purpose of historical personality*. This definition is the first step in moving from a perception of the genre of alternative history to the principle of historical alternativeness. At the next step, alternative history is defined as a rhetorical figure that develops from a symbol. The strongest motivation of alternative history lies in the realm of cultural rhetoric, and this motivation is the will to change culture in order to reform, strengthen, and invigorate it. The analysis will show that alternative history has a paradoxical rhetorical and logical structure with a "genetic" internal contradiction.[21] Alternative history is not a true chaotic system, but rather a strategic mental game which is an imitation, simulation of chaos. Two models are proposed here – logical and rhetorical – which define alternative

[18] Doležel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History*, pp. 101-126. See also: Marie-Laure Ryane, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991.

[19] Nicolas Rescher, *Imagining Irreality: A Study of Unreal Possibilities*, Peru IL, Open Court – Carus, 2003, pp. 270-271.

[20] To this day, the most comprehensive insights on plant mythology remain Jacob Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology* (1883) (trans. by James Steven Stallybrass, Mineola NY, Dover Publications, 2004, pp. 1190-1222), and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 82-98, 794-808).

[21] Nicolas Rescher already showed that counterfactual conditionals as such are drawn from belief-inconsistent hypotheses, thus engendering "aporetic conflicts" (*Imagining Reality*, p. 211).

history, on the one hand, as a general principle of literary reading, and on the other, as a distinct and unique element. The chapter concludes with a differentiation of this element from others such as mistake and missed opportunity, and from related genres such as parallel history. At the same time, the principle discussed here is distinct in well-known literary genres, such as the picaresque novel and the baroque play. The preliminary theoretical discussion in Chapter 1 evinces the need to re-evaluate the theoretical basis of the study of alternative history.

Chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of the state of the research in the field, or more precisely, the theoretical part of the research. In this chapter, the claims or inferred theoretical suppositions of the scholars who have written exhaustively on the discipline over the last decade will be reviewed and examined.[22] These are, first of all, Karen Hellekson, William Hardesty, and Gavriel Rosenfeld,[23] who establish their theories mostly on post-structuralist and post-modernist ideas, such as Hayden White's "metahistory" and Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction."[24] Our aim is to formulate anew a theoretical foundation for this field of research. The significance of this project extends far beyond the specific objectives of research into the genre of alternative history.

Through a critical discussion of the works of scholars mentioned above, we argue that alternative history is not based on historical relativism and cannot be attributed to postmodernism; it is certainly not based on a single historiographical model of any kind and of itself does not constitute a closed, predefined historical or historiographical model.

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[22] I will focus here on literary theory. To the problem of alternativeness in the theory of history, it is useful to refer to the Theme Issue no. 41 of *History and Theory* "Unconventional History" (December 2002). Alexei Bocharov accomplished a systematic research of the problem of alternativeness from the viewpoint of the theory of history, when he stressed the constitutive role of the free will of a personality on the pragmatic and existential levels (Alexei Bocharov, "Problema alternativnosti istoricheskogo razvitiia: istoriograficheskie i metodologicheskie aspekty" ("The Problem of Alternativeness of the Historical Development: Historiographical and Methodological Aspects"), MA Dissertation, Tomsk, 2002).

[23] Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time*, Ohio, The Kent State University Press, 2001; William Hardesty, "Toward a Theory of Alternate History: Some Versions of Alternative Nazis," in Edgar L. Chapman and Carl B. Yoke, eds., *Classic and Iconoclastic Alternate History Science Fiction*, Lewiston and New York, The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003; Gavriel Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

[24] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 105-123.

The work of alternative history cannot be reduced to what Rosenfeld terms the "normalization of memory." Alternative history is not merely a genre of fantasy; it constitutes a world-view, a method of thinking, and a poetic principle that transcends genre boundaries, schools of thought, and historical periods.

This issue will be the subject for the present research, beginning with the discussion of the reading-and-time problem from the personalistic point of view, in the terms of Paul Ricoeur and David Carr,[25] that opens the Chapter 3. Assuming that the principle of historical alternativeness is immanent in literary work in general, it can be defined and used as a narrative-poetic model.[26] This model presents the principle of alternativeness at the levels of myth (plot), identity (character), choice (history), and modes of choice (historiography). The essence of the alternativeness principle is the creation of multiple, parallel possibilities on all these levels and the creation of mechanisms to control this diversity. A genre which is a poetic realization of the principle of alternativeness is primarily intended to mend and rehabilitate the metaphysical conception of historical truth that, over various periods, had been damaged by excessive historical relativism. Alternative history, as we will argue, acts "in defense of history," as Richard J. Evans put it,[27] in face of the "postmodern challenge."[28] Alternativeness is not relativity; similarly, contingency is not arbitrariness; and constructedness is not falsity, as Moshe Rosman wrote in his study on Jewish historiography.[29] The truth of alternativeness in this sense is neither being (reality) nor necessity (utopy),

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[25] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988. David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986.

[26] Mikhail Epstein justifies the use of the "possible" as a universal (and primary) philosophical and cultural category, while surveying the line of "possibilism" in philosophy from Nicholas Cusanus, through Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, to Jean Baudrillard. One of the most prominent though neglected figures in this line is Hans Vaihinger, the author of *The Philosophy of As If* (London, Routledge and Paul, 1949). According to Vaihinger's "principle of factionalism," we act "as if" our ideas of the world were correct. It is so, writes Epstein arguing with Aristotle and affirming Husserl, because the possible precedes the actual, and therefore should be viewed as its constitutive principle (Epstein, *The Philosophy of the Possible*, p. 41).

[27] Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1999.

[28] See: Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1997, p. 152.

[29] Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish Is Jewish History?*, Oxford, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007, p. 182.

but rather a "springy" "thought-hypothesis," in the terms of Mikhail Epstein: "This is a resilience, as a special state of thought-hypothesis, that does not permit its conversion to arbitraryness of any ridiculous assumptions. Possibilistic mode of thinking involves the greatest strain of thought, and not a weak-willed relaxation. The hypothesis is not the first possible opinion, but such an assumption that includes both the actual and necessary, but not reduced to them. To reveal pure possibility, the hypothesis needs a contrasting background, consisting of indisputable facts and irrevocable imperatives."[30]

This nature of alternative history, then, hints at the significance of research into alternativeness in literature, through which the scholar reveals mechanisms that, at the first level, control the creation of myths in a text; at the second level, control the creation of identities; at the third level, control the choices in a text (the alternativeness of conceptions of history); and at the fourth level, control the philosophical-historical foundation of the work, namely, the modes of choice (the alternativeness of conceptions of historiography). While analyzing alternativeness in literature, we are simultaneously discovering both the mythological roots of poetic alternativeness in a given work and analyzing the prevailing realization of the principle of alternativeness in a certain cultural context. The analysis of alternativeness is likely to reveal the narrative-based, ethical, historical, and historiographical premises at the core of the work.

It is rhetoric, the mechanism for establishing multiple possibilities, oscillation and the choice between them, that underlies the work of alternativeness. This links to the problem of contingency, which must not be understood in Rorty's terms, but can remain basicly Aristotelian. As Roman Jacobson already noted, and Group μ and Reuven Tsur following him, rhetoric is used to split reality, discourse, and identity, and therefore to create alternatives at all the above-mentioned levels.[31] Through historical alternativeness, a literary work realizes its ethical potential. This was envisioned by Martha Nussbaum, Wayne C. Booth and other promoters of the "ethical turn,"[32] but trully comprehended by personalist

[30] Epstein, *Filosofiia vozmozhnogo*, p. 83.
[31] Roman Jacobson, "Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics," in Thomas A. Sebeok, *Style In Language*, Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1960, pp. 350–377. Jacques Dubois, et al., *A General Rhetoric*, trans. Paul B. Burrell and Edgar M. Slotkin, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981. Reuven Tsur, *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*, Amsterdam, North-Holland, 1992.
[32] Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 1988.

narratologists such as Adam Z. Newton and James Phelan.[33] In historical alternativeness, as in rhetoric in general, the ethical aspect is indivisible from the pragmatic one. In other words, the work realizes its potential of multiplicity, as opposed to the Deleuzian and other post-structuralist conceptions, without losing the unifying origin of truth, sign, and meaning. The root of this unity is associated with the transcendental essence of the creation of myth, identity, choice, and modes of choice.

Chapters 4-7 are devoted to a theoretical discussion of the principle of historical alternativeness at these four levels. In Chapter 4, our objective is to show that reading is mythopoesis, not in the sense of the development of a single myth but as oscillation between alternative myths. Following Aleksei Losev, myth is defined as a miraculous personalistic history that is conveyed in words, when miracle is a realization of the transcendental purpose of the personality in the empirical history.[34] In order to re-establish the mythopoesis theory, we add to the theory of mythopoesis, as it has been developed elsewhere,[35] the category of the possibility, or more precisely, of multiple possibilities. We formulate a "possibilistic" theory of myth. Myth can be seen from this perspective as the history of a possible realization of personality, where the miracle is seen as one of the possibilities of personality's historical realization. The multiplicity of possibilities may appear both at the level of purpose and at the level of realization – in the multiplicity of empirical histories, that is in the multiplicity of attempts to comprehend the purpose and meaning of history. In this light, alternative history appears as an attempt to overcome historical and ethical determinism.

Thereafter the theoretical basis for the principle of alternativeness in myth is constructed by a critical reading of several texts from Emmanuel Lévinas' *Time and the Other* and from Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. The discussion shifts to the issue of time, particularly the well-

[33] Adam Z. Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1995. James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*, Columbus OH, Ohio State University Press, 1996.

[34] Aleksei Losev, *The Dialectics of Myth* (1930), trans. by Vladimir Marchenkov, New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 185-186.

[35] See: Roman Katsman, *The Time of Cruel Miracles: Mythopoesis in Dostoevsky and Agnon*, Heidelberg University Publications in Slavistics, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang GmbH, 2002, pp. 65-89; *Poetics of Becoming: Dynamic Processes of Mythopoesis in Modern and Postmodern Hebrew and Slavic Literature*, Heidelberg University Publications in Slavistics, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang GmbH, 2005, pp. 99-152.

known dilemma of retrospection and anticipation.[36] Genuine alternative history requires a true oscillation and true free choice at the point of bifurcation, and, accordingly, demands the capability of a true return to the origin and the true creation of a new, unknown future. On the other hand, this future is not the "other," for it must be a realistic, revealed possibility of self-realization, as explained in the first chapter. That is the reason that it is impossible to overcome determinism and build a model of alternative history and historical alternativeness solely on the basis of a philosophy of time like that of Deleuze or Levinas. The course of the discussion will lead us to the need to speak of historical alternativeness in the non-deterministic terms of the theory of rhetoric, presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of rhetoric: it is presented as the practice of creating multiple possibilities and of oscillating between them, as this leads to choosing one particular possibility and ruling out the others. Rhetoric creates multiple narratives, multiple interpretations of reality, multiple aims of persuasion, and multiple values. Through a critical reading of a text by Juri Lotman on rhetoric,[37] the profound link between alternativeness and the essence of rhetoric becomes clear. A rhetorical act brings about the axis of time: it creates the past as a return to the point of bifurcation, the present as the point of the new choice; on top of that, it creates the involvement, identification and the absence of possibilities that were not chosen – as the future. The discussion of alternativeness of myth concludes with an argument on the connection (and the isomorphism) between the discourse of historical alternativeness and the discourse on miracle in mythopoetic literature.

In Chapter 6, the next, and the most important, step is taken: if myth is the history of personality, it must be posited that choosing a myth is also choosing a personality. Accordingly, the next level of alternativeness is the alternativeness of personality. The phenomenon of personalistic alternativeness in alternative history is now distinguished from other, similar phenomena. We will first see that personalistic alternativeness is not substitutability. Moreover, personalistic alternativeness is not a psychological problem. For personality, alternativeness presumes both

[36] Mark Currie, who has worked on the problem of narrative time in all his books, introduces the term "about time" or "backwards time" and emphasizes, partly agreeing with and partly disputing Ricoeur, that the backward movement in time is inherent in any reading and any novel (Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction, and the Philosophy of Time*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 87-106).

[37] Juri Lotman, "Rhetoric as a Mechanism of Meaning-Generation," in *Universe of the Mind*, New York, Tauris, 2001, pp. 36-53.

multiplicity and exchange of personality with another or others. It will be shown that this multiplicity and exchange are different from the multiplicity and interchangeability of personality in mental disorders of the dissociative type, such as multiple personality, schizophrenia, de-personalization, and de-realization. Alternative history is closer to the "healthy" consciousness than to the pathological one. Although historical alternativeness, too, involves a difficult effort of remembrance, it is a successful effort, as opposed to mental disorders, where it fails. Alternative history establishes a "happy" memory, as opposed to a "miserable" memory of pathology. This dynamic of splitting and re-uniting reality is embodied in the textual-linguistic dynamic of splitting language and re-uniting it, which is, in effect, a rhetorical dynamic. At the center of the work of historical alternativeness lies what is called in Paul Ricoeur's later books "the effort of remembering," which is the opposite of the work of contingent or unfounded narration, and of causing something to be forgotten.[38]

After a discussion of Ricoeur's theory of remembering and of Carr's theory of narrative as "the organizing principle […] of the self,"[39] the question is raised: how can a personality in alternative history be both unique and unified, yet also multiple and alternative? We will argue that the unique nature of the personality in alternative history is not its singularity, identicalness, authenticity, or non-repetitiveness. A unique personality is a personality in the process of *becoming*, and becoming is a unique quality par excellence at every single moment. It then emerges that in splitting a given, "existing" history into the multiplicity of possible histories which have "not yet" existed, alternativeness instills history with a transcendent dimension, turns existent reality into becoming, and the historical personality – into a becoming personality, unique in this sense. If so, when alternative history presents historical personalities in the process of becoming, it does not undermine their uniqueness but on the contrary, preserves and strengthens it. Moreover, alternativeness stems from the "becoming nature" of the myth and of the personality.

On the other hand, the unity of the personality stems from the rhetorical nature of alternativeness, that is from the free will to speak and persuade others in "fearless speech" with confidence in the existence of truth and a concern for self, to borrow the concepts in the later work by Michel Foucault.[40] Without the unity and transcendent uniqueness of

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[38] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 56-92.

[39] Carr, *Time, Narrative and History*, p. 73.

[40] Indeed, Foucault opposes (quite unjustly, to my mind) frankness with persuasion. However, his personalistic tendency, with the concepts of truth and self

personality, the multiplicity of personality could not exist either, and consequently, nor could personalistic alternativeness. However, multiplicity on its own does not assume the oscillation between its different units. The connection of oscillation between two possibilities is defined in terms of identification, rhetorical in nature, as Kenneth Burke understood it.[41] We therefore argue that the becoming of personality, while it is noncontiguous, transcendent, and rhetorical, is the essentially renewed identification.

Chapter 7 completes the theoretical discussion of the principle of historical alternativeness, after it has been elucidated that personalistic alternativeness is its nucleus. Without a discussion of the choice itself that is the basis of identification, it is impossible to explain the alternativeness of personality. The chapter consists of two sections: alternativeness of choice and alternativeness of modes of choice. In order to discuss the question of what is choice, we will construct – on the basis of the Semiotic Square developed by Algirdas Greimas – a dynamic vector square of choice (on the continuum of identification-alienation), so that the movement between its angles is caused by free will. The vector square replicates itself, gives rise to new squares insofar as the personality moves along its sides, and so the chain of squares assembles a "becoming-based" algorithm of choice. The two basic characteristics of the algorithm correspond to the two principles of becoming: the hierarchical structure of the algorithm corresponds to the transcendental principle of becoming, while its dynamic temporal continuity corresponds to the historical principle. The claim is made that only by exposing the transcendental structure of choice (embodied in the algorithm) can one truly be conscious

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at its center, prevails in his last works, particularly in his discussion of the Greek "parrhesia": "parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)" (Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech,* Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2001, p. 20).

[41] In his well-known analysis of Milton's "Samson Agonistes," Burke writes that identification allows "a ritualistic kind of historiography in which the poet could, by allusion to a Biblical story, 'substantially' foretell the triumph of his vanquished faction;" by identification, "the poet presents a motive in an essentially magnified or perfected form, in some way tragically purified or transcended;" it is "dramatic equivalent for an 'entelechial' pattern of thought whereby a thing's nature would be classed according to the fruition, maturing, or ideal fulfillment, proper to its kind;" "That is: the filling of something is the changing of it, and the statement of the thing's nature before and after the change is an identifying of it" (Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 1969, pp. 19-20).

and free in what one chooses and does. The main argument here is, then, that alternative history allows the reader to face a choice in a way that enables him/her to think of the mode of choice.

Therefore, the second section of the chapter deals with alternativeness in modes of choice. Choosing between the various modes of choice depends on the person's perception of the relationship and the distance between his/her self-image as a living personality and self-image as a machine. This insight serves as the starting point in examining the taxonomy of modes of choice. It may be said that each of the motives of choice defines in a different way the relationship between man and machine, between freedom and necessity. This, of course, is not an a priori unequivocal scale; it is not absolute but rather relative, yet it is still the most relevant scale for evaluating the relationship between different motives for choice. It is the perception of history that ultimately determines the mode of choice. Oscillation, on which alternative history is based, is not just wavering between different histories but essentially, between different historiographies, so that literature of this type is depicted as alternative historiography.

Chapter 8, the longest in the book, devoted to an analysis of the principle of historical alternativeness, including its four levels, in S. Y. Agnon's *The City with All That Is Therein (Ir u-mloa),* Book Two. Important articles have been written on the stories in the book,[42] yet only one book has dealt with it in full – *City, Law, Story* by Shulamit Almog. It focuses on one issue, the issue of justice, and relates to selected stories in the book.[43] Many studies are being written on Agnon, but *The City with All That Is Therein* is an area that has been relatively neglected by the scholarly community.[44] It was scarcely discussed in recently published

[42] To mention just a few: Shmuel Werses, "Ha-tzadik be-gehenom" ("The Tzadik in the Hell"), in Tzvia Ben-Yosef Ginor, ed., *Mekhkarim be-sifrut Yisrael mugashim le-Avraham Holtz (Studies in Jewish Literature in the Honor of Abraham Holtz)*, New York, JTS, 2003, pp. 109-124; Hillel Weiss, "Sippurei ha-khazanim le-Agnon" ("The Cantors Stories by Agnon"), *Amudim* 614 (1998), pp. 21-25; Dan Laor, "Haim katav Agnon al ha-Shoah?" ("Did Agnon Write on the Holocaust?"), *Yad va-Shem* 22 (1993), pp. 15-47. Yehuda Friedlander, "Ha-maarag ha-satiri be-sipurim 'Ha-tzfardeim' ve-'Mazal dagim'" ("The Satirical Fabric in the Stories 'The Frogs' and 'Pisces'"), *Bein halakha le-haskala (Hebrew Satire and Polemics in Europe during the 18th-20th Centuries)*, Ramat Gan, Bar-Ilan University Press, 2004, pp. 336-351.

[43] Shulamit Almog, *Ir, Mishpat, Sippur (City, Law, Story)*, Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, Schocken, 2002.

[44] Recently, we are apparently witnessing an awakening of the interest in the book. See in *Ayin Gimel: A Journal of Agnon Studies*, vol. 2 (2012): Avidov Lipsker,

books on Agnon, except of sporadic references to particular separate stories, which were published separately or included in earlier volumes of Agnon's stories, such as *Korot Bateynu (The Chronicles of Our Houses)*.[45]

We suggest that *The City with All That Is Therein* can be presented as the alternative history of a community, which is created in lieu of a community that was wiped out in the Holocaust – the community of Buchach, where Agnon had been born. That is the first meaning of the concept of alternative history with regard to this book. The second meaning, no less important, is that a new community created in the book is, metaphysically speaking, the true community, at least more true than the historical one. The third meaning of the principle of alternativeness in Agnon's work is connected to the fantastic or miraculous element. We argue that Agnon's discourse of the miraculous may be defined as alternative history. This concept both defines the relationship between the miracle narrative and other narratives in the text, and makes it possible to understand beyond the external level of narrative (the level of the alternativeness of myth) the following levels: alternativeness of personality, choice, and modes of choice. Furthermore, the concept of alternative history in relation to Agnon's work is of special importance because it sheds light on the problematic relationship between miracle and history. And finally, the fourth meaning of the principle of alternativeness in *The City with All That Is Therein* (as in other of Agnon's works) is expressed in the well-known phenomenon of factual uncertainty. Almost

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"Hashgakha be-me'ey ha-daga" ("Providence in the Belly of the Fish. Book of Jonah, the Midrash, and Jacob Steinhardt's Edition. 'Pisces' by S.Y. Agnon and Yosl Bergner's Edition"), pp. 46-92; Alan Minz, "Reading Hahazanim," pp. 93-107; Michal Arbel, "Ha-khazanit ha-atzuva Miriam Dvora ve-khazanim akherim be-sipurei Agnon 'Ha-khazanim,' 'Lefi ha-tzaar ha-sakhar'" ("Miriam Dvora, the Melancholic Cantor: On 'Ha'hazanim' and 'Lefi ha'tsa'ar ha'sachar' by S.Y. Agnon"), pp. 108-130. See also: Roman Katsman, *Nevua ktana: kenut ve-retorika be-*Ir u-mloa *le-S.Y. Agnon ('A Small Prophecy': Sincerity and Rhetoric in* Ir u-mloa *by S.Y. Agnon)*, Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University Press, 2013.

[45] See: Nitza Ben-Dov, *Khayim ktuvim: al otobiografiiot sifrutiiot israeliiot (Written Lives: On Israeli Literary Autobiographies)*, Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, Schocken, 2011, Chapter 1; Elkhanan Shiloh's book *Ha-kabbala be-yetzirat S.Y. Agnon (The Cabbala in the Work of S. Y. Agnon)*, Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University Press, 2011, pp. 278, 368; Ziva Shamir, *Shai olamot (The Multifaceted Agnon)*, Tel-Aviv, Ha-Kibbutz Hameuhad, 2010; Hans-Jurgen Becker and Hillel Weiss (eds.), *Agnon and Germany*, Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010; Yaniv Hagbi, *Language, Absence, Play,* New York, Syracuse University Press, 2009; Tzahi Weiss, *'Mot ha-Shekhina' be-yetzirat Agnon ('The Death of the Shekhina' in Agnon's Work)*, Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009.

every representation or image in Agnon can unfold and develop as alternative history, and that is what the reading of the stories demonstrates in this chapter.

In an analysis of the stories "Rabbotenu ha-rishonim be-Buchach" ("Our First Rabbis in Buchach") and "Arie de-Bei ilai" ("The Lion of Bei Ilai"), Agnon's main alternative history is revealed, that is the rabbinical or Jewish-pedagogical history. Its essence is the passing on Torah teachings as personal knowledge, to use the terminology of Michael Polanyi,[46] or as it is emphasized in an analysis of the following stories, the process of initiation and education of the Torah scholar, with dialogue, crisis, and innovation at its center.[47] At the heart of Agnon's poetics of alternativeness lies the conflict between various historiographic views – deterministic and non-deterministic – and this conflict, as a kind of genetic code, can be discerned in almost every character, image and narrative in the text. After this discussion, the analysis focuses on two longer stories that make up the main part of Book Two of *The City with All That Is Therein*: "Ha-mevakshim lahem rav, o be-ruakh ha-moshel" ("In Search of a Rabbi, or The Spirit of the Ruler"), and "Ha-mashal ve-ha-nimshal" ("The Parable and the Moral"). Both stories present two central symbols of historical alternativeness for Agnon: the first – the fish and the salt, and the second – the hollow of a sling.

The concept of historical alternativeness describes the uniqueness of Agnon's philosophical poetics and the relationship between the various layers of meaning much more effectively than concepts such as allegory or meta-realism. From a theoretical viewpoint, it is demonstrated that historical alternativeness is justified here by means of a metaphysical perception, moreover – by means of religious faith. This conclusion is in accord with the stance formulated in the theoretical section, according to which alternative history (as a genre and as a principle) develops from the metaphysical view of history and truth. At the level of alternativeness of modes of choice, the symbols of alternativeness discerned here embody the historiographic and discursive-philosophical question, Hamlet's dilemma: To write or not to write history, to speak or not to speak of the past, to remember or to forget? This question is connected to another historiographic question: is it possible and necessary to justify history, and if so, how? These questions are connected to the essence of Jewish

[46] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958.
[47] Cf. also: Susan Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, Washington, University of Washington Press, 2011.

hermeneutics as a part of Jewish pedagogy:[48] interpretation is an attempt to realize possibilities of meaning that are not yet realized but could be, were, or will be realized. Interpretation is, we would thus suggest, an alternative history. It turns out then that innovation in the study of Torah is a symbol and realization of the principle of the historical alternativeness. Later in the analysis, Agnon's writing will be defined as ethical historiography and historical intuition.[49] These features are fully realized in the main part of the story – the story of the initiation of the protagonist, Rabbi Mordechai, as a Talmudic scholar.

The last part of Chapter 8 is devoted to a discussion of the story "The Parable and the Moral," which describes the tour of Gehenna by Rabbi Moshe and the servant of the synagogue. At the center of the story is the community's memory of the Khmelnitsky pogroms, and the character of Rabbi Moshe signifies the historical crisis, the breakdown of the continuity of genealogy and history, and therefore he desperately seeks a way to release the "princess" (*bat ha-melekh*) – his relatives' daughter who survived the pogroms, from *aginut*[50] (both actual and symbolic). *Aginut*, one of the central themes throughout Agnon's writing, is presented as a symbol of alternative history. It is joined by the next symbol, which is the central symbol of alternativeness in the story – the hollow of a sling (the parallel in Jewish mysticism to the purgatory in Christianity). Man's suffering in the hollow of the sling is caused by his seeing the consequences of his sins. Before his eyes another world is revealed, a world that he does not identify as his own. It is as though man can view an

[48] It apparently may be, though, that pedagogy of a certain kind is a part of hermeneutics. This is the view of such experts in hermeneutical philosophy as Paul Fairfield and Jean Grondin, who establish a theory of dialogical education on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and his notions, such as fusion of horizons (Jean Grondin, "Gadamer's Experience and Theory of Education," in Paul Fairfield, ed., *Education, Dialogue, Hermeneutics*, London and New York, Continuum, 2011, p.14). For the extensive discussion of the subject see: Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education*, Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 1992.

[49] We can accept here only the personalistic and becoming elements of Benedetto Croce's conception of historiography, but not his negation of the metaphysics of history (Benedetto Croce, *Theory and History of Historiography* (1917), trans. by Douglas Ainslie, Nabu Press, 2010). Nevertheless, his equation between history and philosophy (spirit) may be transformed into Agnon's supposed equation between (Jewish) history and (personalistic) pedagogy.

[50] *Aginut* is a halakhic term: a state of a woman being "bound by marriage" and not allowed to remarry because her husband's death has not been conclusively verified.