

# HER BEAMING FACE



*Dalit Matatyahu*

A woman is drawing in her drawn room. She was once a homeowner but tired of that home and left it, knowing both equally, the home of tangible existence and the abode of art.<sup>1</sup> She has opted for a force that seems to shift her wanderings to the innocence of the traditional

<sup>1</sup> Paraphrasing of the conversation with Hanoah of Szibucz in S.Y. Agnon's novel *A Guest for the Night*, in which he opines about the art of theater, and by extension — art in general; S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Kouvis (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2014), p. 112.

Jewish *shtetl*, and chose to bathe in the time of the old Jewish community in the Old City of Jerusalem, which glows with Agnon's language, the language of the Mishna and Aggadah, like a midrash that stands firm in its clarity. She knelt to draw the contours of the destroyed Temple and the houses of prayer erected in its place with a pencil whose substance dissipated, so as to summon heavenly shrines into her heart and seek answers in spiritual realms.

And I, who knew her, but know not why “it is ordained for every man whom he is to know, and when he is to get to know him, and how,”<sup>2</sup> follow her impressions; my eye is contracted and cannot discern any innovation whatsoever, except from its own perspective. It cannot but assume the visual work as the result of Agnon's literary oeuvre to which it looks, as an intention embedding innocence and irony. The splendor of the ironic is greater and more plentiful for it than the innocence, due to its revealing quality. Because the imperative to inquire repeatedly is innate to Agnon's language, and like it, also the impotence of exegesis, whereby “you take cobwebs and stick them together with other cobwebs and say, It's a magnificent palace.”<sup>3</sup>

The drawn room of the drawing woman is cast on the gallery floor, absorbing layers of projection processes. These originate in drawing the room from above (with pencil on paper), followed by virtual insertion of the artist's drawing figure into it, and their fusion into an image whose secret lies in the active material causality of its production. Is there a purpose to the act of drawing recorded on video? The video's editing in a loop captures the lines drawn (on paper? on the floor of the room? on the gallery floor?) in a continuous present of erasive writing, of material existence which gives way to the immaterial. The ripple of white light bathes the space of the room, moving indifferently, ignorant of the projector's light to which it owes its existence.

<sup>2</sup> S.Y. Agnon, “Tehilla,” in *Tehilla and Other Israeli Tales*, trans. I. M. Lask (London and New York: Ram's Horn Books, 1956), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The image's projective quality — the projected image or projection as an act of drawing, due to the hand's stubborn aspiration to draw the light — is at the focal point of Yifat Bezael's work. Its variations will be elucidated here not through the mediational-technological context, but rather through the drawn realms of language.

S.Y. Agnon's novel *Tehilla* (to which Bezael refers in her work) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* are as far removed as the length of the light beam passing over their spines; they differ in origin and language, in the theological point of view of one, and the atheist viewpoint of the other. Nevertheless they come together in the sense of destruction and loss of that which was ruined and that in which ruination is a-priori embedded, before it ever occurred. The yearning for the insubstantial foundations of being is constituted in both these texts in tangible, quintessentially visual manners to form a near-mechanic “apparatus” which sheds its light on every object and anyone standing in the range of its projective action.

“There was an old woman in Jerusalem, nicer than anybody you have ever seen. She was good and wise and meek and charming. The light in her eyes spoke forbearance and mercy, and the wrinkles in her cheeks, blessings and peace.”<sup>4</sup> *Tehilla*, the beam of light in Agnon's story, projects all that is pure, refined, and stable in the religious Jewish way of life on her surroundings. Her many deeds and measured words present a life shrouded in determinism,

in the tension between lifting a finger here on earth, and a divine decree from above. This presence constitutes a resistant space for wallowing, intimacy, touch, ostensibly marking a spot outside the circle of light in which the nameless narrator stands, as if he were a bystander, an onlooker, unfolding the story of his acquaintance with Tehilla as a sequence of random encounters in a near-identical pattern of a split point of view.

The narrator first encounters Tehilla while wandering in search of the rabbi's house: "Come along and I'll show you, said she to me. No need to bother, said I to her, just tell me where it is and I'll find the way. At this she smiled and said, Why do you mind if it is given to an old woman like me to fulfill a commandment? If it's a commandment you're fulfilling, said I, then by all means enjoy the privilege; but give me this can you are holding. Why, said she smiling, do you want to make the commandment less? I certainly don't want to make the commandment any less, said I, but only to lessen your trouble. It isn't any trouble at all, said she, but a privilege, for the Blessed Holy One has given His creatures the strength to attend to their needs with their own hands."<sup>5</sup>

This is an exchange of standard words, cliché manners by which Agnon sketches, in his honed language, a description of a struggle bound to repeat in their following encounters as well. The narrator is drawn to Tehilla's light, but at the same time he wishes to keep a distance, which is perceived as one "means" of seeing. The restraint of their struggle lies not only in Tehilla's gentle talk, but also in the

dialogic nature of the encounter through and to which the author's worldview infiltrates. Per our context, Agnon's multi-hued interplay with truth and doubt, decrees of fate and free choice, is a dance oscillating between the light of fiction and the shadow of the real, which is also embodied in the presence of the image projected in the gallery space. Its elusive essence – and there is nothing new about that – is a lodestone. It mesmerizes the viewer to its light in the darkened space, and to its movement vis-à-vis inanimate objects. But the most fascinating moment is the moment of interfacing between the viewer's physical presence and the beam of light casting the image; a moment in which the mechanical indifference of the projector is reversed, and it forthwith becomes an object of plea. That moment – which is experienced as an interruption to the viewers who opted for a safe distance from the image, and therefore they implore that one viewer to remove his silhouette from the picture – that moment holds the irony of the image's migration. Its partial shift from the projected surface to the viewer's face and body, superimposes imaginary layers – the layer of doubt and disbelief atop the layer of its suspension, and the layer of fiction on the layer of reality.

"[A]nd pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and

looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example."<sup>6</sup> Not even a shadow of doubt gnaws upon Mrs. Ramsay's existence as she looks toward the lighthouse. Doubt will creep in soon enough, but for the time being her entire person observes. At the heart of Woolf's literary universe towers the lighthouse – an island of stability within the transient and evanescent, which illuminates the novel's protagonists, sketching their unfulfilled desires. The vertical shape on the horizon is revealed as a stylistic and thematic apparatus which centralizes but does not control, allowing each character operating by its light to live in its own "dream world." Its effect on the reader inspires the sense that he is becoming the very thing he is reading, and that "thing" is a bodiless world, due not to a lack of clarity, but a lack of stability.

The "moving image" which Woolf introduced in her work follows from her ambiguous relations with photography and the cinematic medium, a relationship that informed both the nature of the perception of reality and the search for meta-linguistic modes of representation. In her essay "The Cinema," Woolf characterized the observation of projected images: "We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence."<sup>7</sup> The nature of the gaze sketched here calls to mind Mr. Ramsay's occupation, as explained to Lily

Briscoe, the painter character in the novel: "She asked him what his father's books were about. 'Subject and object and the nature of reality,' Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens, she had no notion what that meant. 'Think of a kitchen table then,' he told her, 'when you're not there'.<sup>8</sup>

The epistemological discussion of our perception of the world, following the heritage of Platonic idealism, will split into two stances with regard to the projected image. One pertains

to its innate contradiction, being an absorbing, seductive and captivating image which, concurrently, highlights our absence from it; the other involves its ability to highlight the imaginary as a thought pattern, such as the one introduced with sarcasm in Virginia Woolf's description of Lily Briscoe,

who, whenever she thought of Mr. Ramsay's occupation, clearly envisioned a large kitchen table: the ideal of a table, and at the same time – the physical table used to produce his books. As opposed to the projector installed or suspended in the gallery space, whose instrumental presence we wish to conceal as the emergence of a rabbit without a hat, the "illuminating apparatus" in both *Tehilla* and *To the Lighthouse* is a subject or an exposed object, whose visibility is essential. At the same time, the gaze in both works, more than it is turned to the "apparatus," is activated from within and in its field of influence. That field – whose boundaries will be sketched amid Jerusalem's alleys, in southwest England, or in the gallery space – is a realm

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2002), p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Cinema," *Collected Essays*, vol. II (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950), pp. 267-272.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

of creation unfolding before us as a collection of screens-images, which are reflected in one another and shed their light on each other. The light, which by its very nature is a condition for seeing, is, of course, also a basic condition for the physical existence of light-mediated images, and even more so – for the act of interpretation. Light-related idioms pave our way there: To enlighten us, to see a thing in the light of another, or to see the light, which signifies the mystical extreme of the search for illumination, enlightenment, elucidation, explication.

Tehilla's heart's desire is to infuse meaning into her anguished life, and by analogy (discussed by many scholars) also in Jerusalem life after the destruction of the Temple – a rift that spawned two channels of projection whose gist is the conversion of the material for the spiritual: one – the replacement of the ritual of sacrifice by textual ritual – is described by Alan Mintz as follows: “The sages were well aware that they were living in a period in which the channel of prophecy has been sealed, and the Shekhina was exiled from its worldly abode. Authoritative religious figures could no longer expect a direct divine revelation. Only one source remained through which to discover the will of God: the Holy Bible. The Temple was destroyed, but the text remained intact.”<sup>9</sup> The other is revealed in the poetic-mystical work that came to be known as the “Hekhalot and Merkabah literature,” which, according to scholar Rachel Elior, emerged from

<sup>9</sup>  
Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2003), p. 49 [Hebrew]; see also: Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

<sup>10</sup>  
Rachel Elior, “From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Song in Hekhalot Literature and its Relation to Temple Traditions,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 4:3 (1997): 217-267.

the historical crisis of the abolition of sacrifice, and constituted a visionary world view whereby the priestly and Levitical tradition of service in the Temple was shifted from the earthly to the heavenly.<sup>10</sup>

Reading *Tehilla* as a video work embedded in the written text reveals a relationship between virtuality (like that of the projected image) and the surrounding corporeal world. Unlike cinema, which allocates a designated space for the emergence of the imaginary, video art works

are installed in the gallery space, often next to other exhibits, and in relation to an active, wandering viewer, whose gaze is involved in this differentiating relationship and concurrently constitutes it. The beam of light (Tehilla) is embodied as a means (at the artist's disposal) to project an intricate image, whose conditions of creation owe to the emergence of the physical

dimension (the narrator). A correlation between these dimensions occurs in the story when the flood of light – the daily routine of Tehilla, who is subjected to a deterministic regularity of prayer, keeping the commandments, and charity – is shifted to (superimposed on) the figure of the narrator, who is shrouded by doubt. The result of this overlapping is the testimony: the writ of excuse addressed to Shraga, which waited 93 years for the conditions of its appearance to emerge.

What is that testimony if not erosion of the image's signed and sealed dimension? Will the reader accept the decrees of fate (the death of

Tehilla's two sons and her daughter's conversion, which is likened to the destruction of the Temple) as equals (in the sense of “the fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge”), as implied by the identity between the date in which her betrothal to Shraga was broken off and the date of her son's death, and the identity between the dates of the destruction of both Temples? Perhaps under the guise of the popular motif about an old woman who has taken a letter of apology to the grave, Agnon is formulating a more radical truth about the fragile nature of the imaginary and its ramified relations with the real? What is the validity of the images by which we live and construe our lives? Is it the manner of the projected image to fail us?

“[S]uddenly she added:

We are in the hands of the Lord. But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie.”<sup>11</sup>

Doubt takes hold of Mrs. Ramsay, rebelling against the seductiveness of the stroke and the sense of oneness with the world it instilled in her; as if she were caught in an experience that melts the human with the inhuman, and in the theist language by which it is customarily represented. Because the mystical experience, as Martin Corner observed, emerges in Virginia

Woolf's writing in two distinct varieties: in the form of the experience presented here, which is typified by fusion of the imaginary into the real, and in the relationship with the imaginary which, simultaneously, preserve the distance demanded by reality; the “‘fusing’ and ‘facing’ experiences.”<sup>12</sup>

“She praised herself in praising the light, *without vanity*, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light. It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things [...]; felt they expressed one.”<sup>13</sup> This is the fine literary scalpel which infiltrates the gap between the ode to light (*Tehilla*) and the risk in succumbing to its temptations; a resounding reminder of the steady light of the projector which has neither compassion nor regret, and does what it deems right.

<sup>11</sup>  
Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup>  
See Martin Corner, “Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*,” *Studies in the Novel*, 13:4 (Winter 1981), pp. 408-423.

<sup>13</sup>  
Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 65 [emphasis mine; D.M.].