

Whisiting a Chicken

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In the beginning of Alan Parker's film *Angel Heart* (1987) we encounter a strange, elegant man named Louis Cyphre (Robert De Niro), whose long, impeccably manicured nails cannot be missed, peeling a hard-boiled egg while interviewing a private detective named Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke). The detective is hired to investigate the mysterious disappearance of an American crooner toward the end of World War II.

The plot unfolds into searches in New Orleans, in southern provinces immersed in demonic voodoo rituals and black magic, and is accompanied by a chain of particularly horrifying murders, most often involving people's hearts being plucked out. In the film, named after the detective, the protagonist learns, to his great horror—as in a Greek tragedy—that he is the subject of his own investigation. *He* is the source of the crime; he is the perpetrator of the horror, the incest, much like Oedipus, the father-brother of his daughter Antigone, whose tragedy is embodied in the distorted sisterly relations that dictate her life: she has not two, but three brothers; not only the brothers who fought and killed each other, but also a father-brother who guides her tragic insistence on preserving the brother/brothers' honor.

As in the Faust legend, the protagonist makes a pact with the devil, selling his soul-heart to him. The buyer, the creditor of Harry's soul-heart, is the employer, Louis Cyphre, whose charged surname indicates a riddle, a cipher, or a code. The visible cipher, however, conceals what is hidden inside,

that he is, in fact, Lou-Cyphre, namely, Lucifer—the angel Hillel Ben-Shahar, who was endowed with infinite beauty, but rebelled against the divine law and was banished to hell. He is the father of all horror and scandal, but, as in the commandment of Greek wisdom—Know thyself—he leads the one who becomes enslaved to him to self-knowledge; a petrifying knowledge.

The conversation between Cyphre, who is busy peeling or squeezing the shell of a hard-boiled egg with his fingernails, and the detective, to whom he offers a pact, begins as follows:

LC: You know, some religions think that the egg is the symbol of the soul, did you know that?

HA: No, I didn't know that.

LC: Would you like an egg?

HA: No thank you, I got a thing about chickens.

What is this "thing" Angel has about chickens? A fascination? A problem? Perhaps the closest thing, *The thing*, is the eschewal, the aversion to that which represents for the victim himself—that is, for Harry—the latent core underlying the horror of his own murderous existence: he, who unknowingly took part in sacrificial chicken slaughter and in bloody voodoo ceremonies, is himself the one being slaughtered, murdered.

I am writing this text in the month of Tishrei, at the end of Yom Kippur (Jewish Day of Atonement) and the *Kapparot* ceremony (ritual slaughter of

chickens) performed on its eve. My Facebook is filled with images of chickens alluding to that Jewish custom. Many Jewish artists, famous to a greater (Chagall, Soutine, Bezem) or lesser extent, painted chickens, whether roosters or hens. These birds are the sacrifice, the substitute, which can also be eaten, and can also guarantee a profit, well-being, and redemption to those performing the ceremonies—*kapparot*, voodoo, summoning spells—in a bleeding dialogue with them. And let us not forget that an angel, much like fowl, is a winged creature.

I turn to S.Y. Agnon and his stories, which are rife with descriptions of chicken beheading and throat slitting. This is also a "thing," a Jewish "thing." I do not pretend to know and mention them all, but one may recall *The Lady and the Peddler* where Joseph the peddler begins to realize where he has arrived—to the gentile Hilni, a woman vampire who eats the flesh of her husbands, whom she slaughters, and drinks their blood—and is shocked to "see her twisting the neck of a bird" to make him "meat in butter"¹; or the short story *The Carpenter and the Rooster*, which details the course of a rooster being devoured: "Israel took the chicken and went back home. He plucked its feathers and tore it apart and cleaned it and took out its intestines and washed the chicken [...] and ate and gobbled, and gobbled and ate the internal organs and the external ones and cracked the bones and sucked out their marrow and scraped and swallowed and gnawed."²

¹ S.Y. Agnon, "Three Stories: The Lady and the Peddler," trans. Robert Alter, *Commentary* (December 1966), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/s-agnon/three-stories-the-lady-and-the-peddler/>.

² S.Y. Agnon, "The Carpenter and the Rooster," in *Of Such and Of Such: Stories [Elu va-Elu]* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), p. 160 [Hebrew]; free translation from the Hebrew.

In Agnon's *A Simple Story*, the rooster is literally present throughout the text. Hirshl, the protagonist, is both ill—"lovesick"—and also the inheritor of the family curse of madness; at the same time, he may just be faking it to avoid military service: "I'm not a rooster! I am not!"³ (Which forthwith calls to mind the memory of the prince who thought he was a turkey [*hindik*] in the tales of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov), in a kind of mad cock-a-doodle-dooish dialectic: "You said I was crazy because I cock-a-doodle-doo, but now you can see that I cock-a-doodle-don't think that I'm gaga that I'm ga ga ga ga ga a crazy man crows like a rooster but I go ga ga ga ga."⁴ A ga-ga vs. cock-a-doodle-doo battle. And here comes Balak, the "Crazy Dog," as per the inscription painted on the stray mutt's flanks by Isaac Kumer, the house painter, in Agnon's novel *Only Yesterday*.

This not-so-simple story is full of sounds and language games, as in children's language, which is comprised of basic syllables, culminating in the "*whisht*" (Heb. *khic*). "Mr. Coo-coo," says Hirshl, "kept me up all night again. I do believe it's time we got rid of him. Don't you think we might take him to the throat-slitter? He just has to go *whisht* and there's no more cock-a-doodle-do. Hirshl ran a finger over his throat and laughed."⁵ Indeed, the laughter (Heb. *skhok*) is *whisht* (Heb. *khik*), and it is also the erosion or decay (of bones; Heb. *shkhik*). Agnon refines a murderous-merry syllable in the word *khik* (*whisht*), which is a cross between Hebrew and Yiddish, an Agnonesque joke.

³ S.Y. Agnon, *A Simple Story*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2000 [1985]), p. 174.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Many other motifs may be linked to this, such as the laws of sleep and sleepwalking, insomnia and the "cock crow." Here I face the gender dilemma: shall I distinguish between images of roosters and those of hens, between men and women? Both sport a tilted neck and are doomed to have their throat *whishted* when the story is simple.

Anat Betzer's rooster paintings are strikingly masterful. Beautiful and glorious, every feather of the tail and comb is meticulous; they come closer to the beauty of Japheth than the slaughter and circumcision associated with the sons of Shem.

These paintings were carefully selected from an image bank centered on roosters, or rather "cocks": they win beauty pageants held by farmers. Betzer's array also spans the "man"-rooster, if only insinuated. And it also spans pullets and hens, specifically one that had undergone a *whisht*. Her head was cut off and she has remained a quasi-animal, with legs and no head; a woman for all intent, as well as a portrait of the momentary preservation of life before nothingness, as roosters are known for their minor ability to survive death, and live on with a headless body. Here, they shine in a kind of disgust-infected beauty; they are Betzer's "thing."