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Agnon, the Hebrew Language, and the Nobel Prize, 1966.

AGNON, THE HEBREW LANGUAGE AND THE NOBEL PRIZE

Sunday, October 30, 1966

The Temple

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

The Nobel committee has provided me with a new answer to an old question. The old question is the familiar Sunday School complaint, "Rabbi, why must I study Hebrew?" The familiar and adequate answer, of course, is "we study Hebrew in order to be able to participate in our worship and in the inner and real meaning of our religious tradition." Now I think I have a new and very succinct addendum, 'In order that you can read the work of this year's Nobel laureate in literature of Samuel Joseph Agnon.'

Agnon and Miss Nellie Sachs are the first Jews ever to have been selected for this prize. Agnon is, of course, the first Israeli and the first writer in the Hebrew language to have been so honored. I do not believe that he will be the last. You may not know these names, Hayyim Haziz, Aharon Meged, Moshe Shamir, but they are the leading novelists, playwrights, and poets in Israel today, and they are the leaders of an exciting and creative circle of Hebrew writers who are bringing into being a true literary renaissance of the old holy language. We Jews are not deserting the book.

What these men have lacked so far has been an audience. They have written and written well, but, they have not had an international reputation. This is so in part because they write in Hebrew. Of course

Hebrew is not an impossible riddle. It can be mastered. Interestingly, Agnon is the first author honored by a Nobel prize who wrote in a language other than the language of his cradle. He had to learn Hebrew the way you and I have had to learn it in school. Hebrew can be learned. I recommend it to you. And that is my last commercial for the morning. More than this, many of these works are available in translation. The tragedy is that they simply are not read.

Last week I went into our library and picked up the translation of Agnon's The Bridal Canopy, which was the one work specifically cited by the Nobel committee. They compared it to Cervantes' Don Quixote. It was rendered into English thirty years ago. Can you guess how many times it was checked out at the librarian's desk? Less than ten. This honor honors an entire literature and my hope is that you will avail yourself of the opportunity to read it, if not in the original, at least in translation, for it is a first-rate literature and deserves to be read on its own merit.

More than this, for us, as Jews, it is an important literature. There are two great Jewish communities in the world today; our American Jewish community and the Israeli community. If we want to understand one another, we must understand each other's heart and soul for each community is distinctive. The quickest, and best way to achieve this is to read what the writers of the various communities are saying about themselves and their neighbors. Today, the Israelis read English and the American Jews do not even read the Israeli in translation. If we truly believe in a cultural bridge, a bridge of understanding and mutual encouragement, then surely that bridge cannot be a one way street.

Let me tell you a little bit about Agnon. Let me tell you about Agnon as he might want it told, for he is a story teller, he is a novelist - let me tell you about him through his stories. Agnon's stories are hauntingly unrealistic, symbolic in their meaning. They tend to be drawn from the world of imagination. You find yourself caught up in the story and when you finish, suddenly thrust back into the world. You enjoy the hour of the reading and you enjoy wondering what the author really meant. Agnon tells the short story of a Jewish peddler, a pious man, a poor man, who lived in Europe a hundred or more years ago. His clothes were tattered. He had one and only one ambition, one dream, somehow he would go up to the Holy land and there join the circle of those who prayed for the coming of the Messiah, and who bathed themselves in the divine rays of God's presence, which shines more directly on the Jew in Jerusalem than in any place else in this world. The peddler fasted several times each week. He never bought new clothes in order to save the few kopecs that he needed. He was afraid that his cache might be stolen. Where could he keep these few coins that he was hoarding against the day of his going up? If you have been to Southern Europe you have seen the ubiquitous roadside shrines. There is a glass window at the top. There is a cruxifix or statue inside and usually an alms box below. They dot the roadside. Well, this peddler decided that he would put his money in one of these alms boxes. It would be safe there from robbers. When he had enough money

he would collect it and go to Israel. Each long-pack trip that he took would bring in a few dollars and he would put the coins in the alms box. Finally, after years and years of labor, he had enough money to undertake the voyage. He went gladly to the alms box and he was seen and was arrested for stealing money dedicated to the church from a poor box. He was brought to trial. The little peddler understood almost nothing of his arraignment. He saw only the black-cloaked judge sitting high behind his desk. During the proceeding he noticed a crucifix hanging on the wall behind the judge. At one point he thought he saw the icon smile lovingly at him. Sentenced and languishing in his cell he had the sensation that the icon visited him and said to him: "Peddler, you have suffered. Peddler, you have been wrongfully sentenced. I will bring you up to the Holy Land." This poor and pious peddler had the sensation that he was lifted up from his cell and was being drawn through the air. Agnon ends the story by saying, "the next day they found the lifeless corpse of the peddler on a street outside an old Yeshiva in Jerusalem."

When we close this story we are suddenly thrust back into reality. It is an ending which ends nothing. We have enjoyed this tale. It is a tale well told, but what does it mean? The peddler obviously is Israel. The hapless, homeless, persecuted, exiled, poor Israel of the midnight of medieval persecution. An Israel which dreams one dream, to return to freedom and to the Holy Land, an Israel who prays and plans but is frustrated at every turn; accused of crimes it does not and above all, Agnon never forgets that a story-teller must tell a story and it must be a story well told.

commit, imprisoned for crimes for which it is innocent, hoping always, daring somehow to hope, yet the hopes always are dashed. But what is the icon? Whose is the voice? And why the corpse lifeless on the streets of Jerusalem? Agnon himself has interpreted this tale. He said he wrote it when the Balfour Declaration had first been promulgated. The Balfour Declaration, you will recall, was the promise of the English government that Great Britain looked favorably upon the establishment of the Jewish homeland in Palestine, and that she would undertake a mandate for that land with this end in view. But what has an icon, a voice and a corpse to do with the Balfour Declaration? Simply this: Agnon was concerned, in those days that many Jews believed that Israel would be handed to them by men of good will in the Christian world. Here is the Balfour Declaration. There is nothing more we need to do except to go to Zionist conventions and to pass resolutions. All will be given to us." "I was trying to say" he said, "that if you listen to the icon, the symbol of the Christian world, and you believe it, you will be borne, some of you, to Israel, but the Yishuv will be lifeless - the communities will not flourish. I could not foresee then the White Paper, the restriction on immigration, the kow-towing to the Arabs; but I knew that if Israel had not the patience to await its own Messiah, it would have to take nation-building into its own hands else the issue would be a lifeless corpse."

The story stands on its own, but as in all Agnon's stories, there are meanings within meanings, and this is the delight, of course, of great literature. The style is terse and lean. The images tend to be symbolic, and above all, Agnon never forgets that a story-teller must tell a story and it must be a story well told.

Let me tell you another tale! It's a legend called The Story of a Goat. Again, it is a story of the Jewish communities of Central Europe, perhaps a hundred years ago, perhaps less. There is a pious man. Almost all of the heroes of Agnon's stories are poor and pious. This man was poor and he was pious and he was old, and he was invalided. He was wracked by a crouping cough. Such medical advice as there was in his village told him that he should drink the milk of a goat. So he bought a goat. He took the goat to his field and hitched the goat to a stake and allowed the goat to graze. He planned the next morning to milk the goat and to drink the curative liquid. The next morning he went to his field and the goat had disappeared. It was gone one day, a second and third. Then the goat suddenly reappeared. Its udders were filled with milk. The old man milked the goat and the milk was supernaturally sweet and soothing and assuaged the cough. Again he pegged the goat and again the goat disappeared and was gone a day, two, three and four only to reappear with this miraculous milk in its udder. This happened a third time and a fourth. The old man was puzzled. He told his practical-minded son of the mystery. His son acted practically. He took a long piece of string and tied the string to one of the back legs of the animal and said, I will follow the goat and see where he goes. He slept that night in the field and when the goat broke away from his tether the son followed. The goat traveled for a day or two up into the mountains. Finally he went into a cave and into the darkest recesses in the back of the cave where there was a narrow opening. The goat went through and the young lad followed after and found himself in a green and verdant country.

Sunlit, cloudless, a beautiful land, happy farmers in the field, obviously a rich country. The goat climbed a nearby tree and gorged himself on its rich fruit. He drew his fill from a softly gurgling brook nearby and then lay down and slept. The lad noticed the farmers in nearby fields and asked them: "Where am I?" and, "What is this place?" They answered him, "You are in the Holy Land." "This place is near the sacred city of Safed." The young boy rejoiced.

It was believed by the Hassidic Jews of Eastern Europe that after you had emigrated to Israel and come close to God you could not leave Israel without spiritual damage to your soul. The young man could not go down to his home. He had to remain. So he took a note and he wrote on it a message to his father. I have miraculously been led by this goat to the Holy Land. You, too, tie a string to the goat's leg and follow him through the cave and we will quickly again be reunited in the Holy Land. He tied this missive to the horn of the goat. The goat left and the boy remained. The aged, pious, poor, infirm father saw the goat returning and missed the boy. He was disconsolate and in his anger and frustration at the loss of his boy he killed the goat. As the goat fell on the ground the letter fell from its dead body. The father picked up the letter and read it. Agnon ends this story by saying, "...ever after the gates of the cave are sealed, and there is no short way to the Holy Land."

That is a wonderful story. You can apply to it many meanings. Agnon is saying something about the generational conflict in Israel.

There are the pious Jews, the old men who dreamt of the coming of the Messiah and wanted above all else to go to the Holy Land, but who had to await the coming of the Messiah - the Messiah who never came. There were the younger men, the more practical-minded who somehow found out the footprints of the Messiah, and followed the magical goat and got to the Holy Land and wrote back to their fathers, "come up and be with us." The fathers could not and would not. This is one of the great tragedies of the piety and of the energy of the fathers and of the sons. The cave, the short way, is closed. The way of the pioneer and of the youth is open, but the old men cannot take the new way. All of this is somehow bound together in this legend of the goat.

Agnon was born in Galicia in 1888. He was a Zionist from his youth. By the age of fifteen he was writing Zionist editorials for the newspapers in Lwow. At twenty he emigrated to Israel. He settled in Jaffa and got a job in one of the many official bureaus. Zionism to Agnon was a spiritual commitment rather than a political urgency. He came up in what is known as the second Aliyah. This was the immigrant wave that brought in Ben Gurion, and Ben Zvi and most of the leaders of modern Israel, the men who were determined to establish a political state of normal people on their homeland. Agnon wanted something more. Agnon wanted not so much Israel as a Holy Land. He wanted all the virtues of the past. He found instead that the young were impatient with their father's ways. He found that they were ignorant of the traditions of their people. Agnon found himself restless, not quite at home and after five years he returned to Europe.

Thirty years later he was to write a great novel called Only Yesterday, in which he described the inner life of a young man who came up as he had done in the early years of this century. This youth wanted a spiritual satisfaction out of his Zionism and found that the energies and requirements of state building did not fully satisfy him. The protagonist of this story, Only Yesterday, Kummer (the one who comes, the one who grieves) went on a farm and was not satisfied with a plow. He got a job in Jaffa as a housepainter, but he was not satisfied splashing new paint on old walls. He wanted the spiritual experience of being close to God and so he went to Jerusalem and lived there in the Meah Shearim, among the most pious, the most orthodox and the most unworldly of those who had come to Israel to live. He sought among them the meaning of his stay in Israel. He married the daughter of the most orthodox and the most fanatic in the group. But again he is unsatisfied. If the religious had the traditional grace which the young lacked, the young were relevant and the old awkward in this world. In one of the few bitter endings in all of his works Agnon has this young immigrant die bitten by a rabid dog. He named the dog Balak, a symbolic name. If you know your Bible you know that Balak was a King of Moab. During the time of Moses' wanderings in the desert with the people of Israel Balak tried to hire necromancers and sooth-sayers to curse the people of Israel. Agnon was saying something about a curse which can rest upon the new state, if it does not somehow satisfy the spiritual as well as the physical requirements of its settlers. Nationalism is not enough to enliven the soul of man.

Agnon returned to Europe in 1913. Like so many young Jews who had left the shtetle and sought a religious experience in Israel and found themselves unsatisfied, he must have thought he would find it in the great intellectual life of Berlin. But the Berlin of Kaiser Wilhelm was too truculent, too belligerent and too academically arrogant to satisfy Agnon. Though he remained for eleven years he was never a part of the German literary world. He spent his time with Martin Buber collecting the happy tales, the wonder tales of the Hassidim. He spent his time as a tutor in Hebrew and doing research in Jewish history in the libraries. Finally, in 1924, Agnon returned to Israel and settled in Jerusalem near the pious and spent the next five years recreating in novel form the inner life of Hassidic Jewry a hundred and more years before. Agnon does not claim in The Bridal Canopy to give a clear, realistic picture of Hassidic life. Rather he explores its inner meaning, its faith, how it brought light into the poverty, how it brought learning to the ignorant, how it gave a hope of redemption to a hopeless generation. The Nobel committee compared The Bridal Canopy to Cervantes' Don Quixote. The comparison is more structural than substantive. Like Don Quixote the protagonist of The Bridal Canopy sets out on a journey. ^{Like} Don Quixote he is a mystic, an unrealistic man, and as in Don Quixote there is a realistic assistant who brings the visionary back to terra firma. Cervantes wrote his novel sarcastically, ironically to show up the sham and the pretense of a knightly code which Spain had outgrown. Agnon wrote The Bridal Canopy in love. He shared the feeling, the religious emotions, the

religious presence of these Hassidic Jews. Their love of God is his love of God. Their learning was his learning. Their desire for a Holy Land is his desire for a Holy Land. The language is the language of affection. There is no distance between the author and the people he writes about.

These, I suspect, were happy years for Agnon. Years in which he was in Israel but not of Israel. Years in which he re-created in his imagination the world in which he delighted. Then in 1929, there were vicious Arab riots - Agnon's home in Talpith was ransacked and almost destroyed. His wife nearly suffered a nervous breakdown. Again Agnon left Israel. Reality had intruded upon the idyll. He went back to Europe. While he was in Europe he sought for his roots, the warmth, the learning, which he had been writing about all the years, the learning and the love which he had known in his home. He went back to a little town of Buczasz in Galicia, where he had been born. And he found it, as others have found it, that you cannot go home again. He wrote a novel about this visit which he called A Visitor Lodges for the Night. It is a bitter work. He calls his home town not by its real name but Shibbush, an error, a vulgarization of its previous self. He looks for learning and he finds ignorance. He looks for love of God and he finds skepticism. He looks for proud Jews and he finds the cowering and the fearful. He cannot even bring together a minyan for worship in the synagogue which he remembered from his youth as being filled with the learned and the pious singing happily of their faith. He is

shaken. He learns that the world of his memories can never be again, perhaps it is a world that never was. He is ready to give up on that world. But surprisingly, and interestingly at the end of the novel he recalls one of the wonder tales of the Talmud. The tale which says that when the Messiah comes all the synagogues and all the study houses of Israel will move themselves bodily along the highways of the world to the Holy Land. There they will be opened again and thronged. He buys from one of the men of the village a key to his old house of learning and as his last act in the village, he attends the circumcision of a grandson of a friend and as his gift to this little boy he gives him the key to the closed synagogue. At least he will have the key to re-open the synagogue when it does come up. Agnon dreams always of implanting in Israel, of transplanting to Israel, the grand virtues and great affirmations and traditions he knew among the Jews in Eastern Europe. He lives in that faith. He lives between two worlds - in Israel but not of Israel. In a strange way I think he will achieve his ambition. For this literature so brilliantly conceived in style and form is required reading in Israeli schools. When children read it they cannot help but absorb some of its value and of its tradition. Though this world will obviously never be re-created in this traditional form, the synagogues will not be brought to Israel, something of the virtue, something of the love of learning, something of the all-embracing piety will surely come alive in the grandchildren and great grandchildren of Agnon's generation as they read his writing.

Agnon is a man between two generations. His home is in neither.

Perhaps this alienation is the secret of his greatness as an author. His chosen name reveals this. Agnon is a pen name. Agnon is a Hebrew word derived from the noun agunah. The Hebrew word agunah describes a deserted wife. The agunah was a woman whose husband had left her and was not certified dead. Many men had to travel in the course of their business and traveling was dangerous. On the road there were highwaymen and robbers. At the fairs there were drunken peasants and no police to track down a drunkard who attacked Jews. Men had to travel and many who traveled simply disappeared. The Jewish tradition, as you know, is concerned with the sanctity of the home. Judaism required actual witnesses to certify a death before a woman could be allowed to re-marry. There were women in each of the towns of Central Europe, whose husbands had gone to market and were simply not heard of again. The prescription against their re-marriage was maintained because ever and again such a man turned up years later. He had been captured, sold as a slave and years later ransomed. Somehow he made his way back to his home town. But this was rare. Most of these women were consigned to their loneliness.

Agnon is an agunah, a deserted wife. In love with a wonderful tradition he lives in it. It occupies his imagination. It occupies his reading. It is at the forefront of his consciousness. He does not quite understand the new world. He has been deserted by the past, it is no longer. He cannot marry the new because it is emotionally alien to him. He would like to but he cannot. He comes to Israel but he remains a deserted wife. In Israel but not of the land. This tension

between the generations, between his past and his present, his evocation of the tradition, and his search for new meanings is the tension which permeates all of his writings, and gives meaning to his work. I suspect that it is in this dimension that his work will have last meaning. He has made it impossible for the younger generation, the Canaanites of Israel, those who care not for the past of their people and care less for the religion of their people, to grow up without being exposed to it or appreciating its virtue, without saying to themselves, 'you know, perhaps there was something there. Perhaps there is beauty, a sense of orderliness and light, a sense of virtue and personal dignity which we lack. Perhaps we ought to find some ways to resurrect this old world and bring it into our own.'

Agnon is a strange, pixie-like, brilliant, pious, poor, old man. If you want to understand Agnon perhaps the best way to do so is to understand his response to the Swedish Charge de' affaires in Jerusalem who came to tell him that he had been awarded the Nobel prize. Agnon was overwhelmed. He sat down and had a cup of tea. Then he began to wonder if he could go to Stockholm. The Charge de' affaires said he had heard that Agnon had a bad heart that he might not be able to travel. "Don't worry, don't worry," he said, "if my doctor doesn't let me go I'll find another doctor." Then he went on. "There is in our tradition a special blessing that you say when you meet and see a king and I have never in my life been able to say that blessing. I wouldn't deny myself the mitzvah."

Kaddish

Friday Oct 28
 Sunday 30

Those who passed away this week

LEONORE BASSICHIS	CHARLES KRAMER
HENRY FRANKEL	MARGARET SALOMON
MAX FRANKEL	
JULIUS S. GROSS	

Yahrzeits

~~Yochon~~
 JEAN YELSON LEVIN
 JOSEPH W. SCHIFFER

JACOB REDER
 CLARA SCHWARTZ
 HELEN GOODMAN ALTMAN
 WALTER P. DEUTSCH
 MAX M. ROTHSCHILD
 EMANUEL M. MANDEL
 MORRIS VERNON BROWN
 HELEN M. SILBERBACH
 L. A. BRAHAM
 ADOLPH RITTER
 ROSE RICHMAN UNGER
 ESTHER LEBBY
 HERMAN OPPER
 HELENE R. HIMMEL
 SAMUEL STERN

SOL DORSEY
 HILDA W. KROHNGOLD
 DR. JACOB SIEBERT
 SADELLE KLEIN
 SAM HARRIS
 RACHEL MILLER ELLBOGEN
 JACOB H. ALTMAN
 COLEMAN SPITZ
 HEDWIG HENRY
 BECKY ROSENTHAL
 SIMON FOX
 EDWIN H. WEIL
 PAULINE WEINSTEIN LOCKWOOD
 MARY O. SHAPERO

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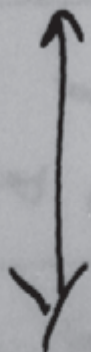
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& given's object is ~~there~~ and lean and the legend is much older.
 The old legends, the new ones, and the new ones are interpreted.
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 and "the new ones" are the new ones in the new ones - the new ones
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The Old gold Mine, Ten Miles from Mt. Rogers in the ^{after copy 20} publication of 1905
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seen in the new land - but not of it. Then in the winter of 1929 he came over
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his winter & spring, he left in the fall, ~~the~~ ^{he} ~~was~~ ^{went} home to BUCKEYE
the land of his birth & youth & his first memories - when he had first
fallen in love with the girl of his people - & he found that 'You can't
be home again'. BUCKEYE was in fact & truth - the same
to find things & find of the new world - winter - peaceful & the
new year & he found none of the new & new of his home. He
returned to himself - neither he nor himself - and made his
shock of rejection into a peaceful road. 1188 207 1211

A Good Time For the Night. The people are children of the
 people - of poor money. The world is not even covered in
murder in the synagogue. There is nothing left. I know not
 when to be new church to make his place. But - a few stamps
 in spirit - I know only the butcher made on act of love. He just
 took to the donated synagogue to a very young, good, and
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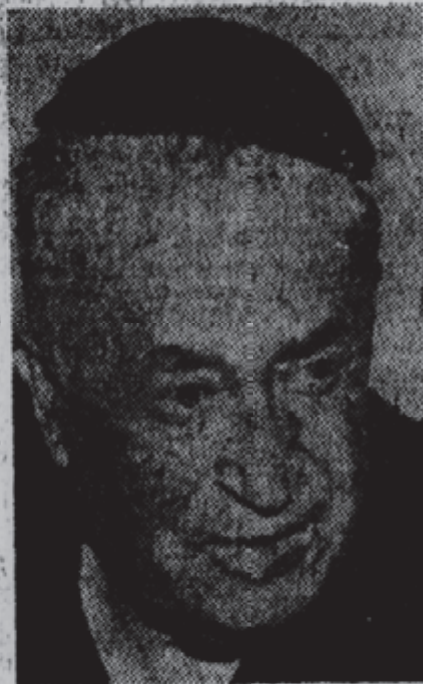
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2 Jewish Authors Share Nobel Literary Prize



Samuel Joseph Agnon

From Wire Reports

STOCKHOLM—The 1966 Nobel Prize for literature was awarded yesterday to two "outstanding Jewish authors, each of whom represents Israel's message to our time."

Samuel Joseph Agnon, a 78-year-old Hebrew writer living in Jerusalem, and poet Nelly Sachs, 74, a German-born Jew who lives in Stockholm, will share the award which is worth nearly \$60,000. Miss Sachs' poems are written in German.

Agnon, born in East Galicia, Poland, is the first Israeli to win a Nobel Prize.

Miss Sachs, a Swedish subject, fled Nazi Germany in 1940.

Dr. Anders Osterling, secretary of the Swedish Academy, which makes the awards, praised Agnon's novels, "The Bridal Canopy,"

Town Bets on Soccer

MONTEMAGGIORE, Sicily (AP)—The deficit-ridden council of this north Sicilian town is trying to solve its budget problems as millions of impoverished Italians do. It created a special fund of 30,000 lire (\$48) to bet in the weekly government-run soccer football pool.

which he compared to "Don Quixote," and his masterwork, "A Guest for the Night."

Osterling mentioned by name only one of Miss Sach's works, the radio play "Eli," which tells of an 8-year-old Jewish boy beaten to death by a Nazi soldier in Poland. She has also published the collections of poems, "Quarters for the Dead," "And Nobody Knows Anything Any more" and "Escape and Transition."

The awards are to be presented Dec. 10, Miss Sach's 75th birthday.



Nelly Sachs

Detroit Police Fight One-Man Cruiser Experiment

DETROIT (AP)—Detroit police are at war with the city over experiment of using only one officer in a patrol car morning and afternoon.

it isn't safe—for them.

Patrolman James E. Radke, 26, has been suspended and faces possible dismissal for refusing to go in a days

city with the National Labor Relations Board.

THE ORDER FOR one-man cars, which took effect 10 days ago, came from Police Giardin.

his intelligence."

What worries the policemen is: Will the muscle be there when it's needed?

The FBI report that one of every 10 police officers in the United States is a

Parsell, president of the policemen's association.

GIRARDIN SAID no officer would be

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anger