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# S.Y. Agnon: Master of Many Voices

## BOOKS

**Shmuel Yosef Agnon:  
A Revolutionary Traditionalist**

By Gershon Shaked  
Translated by Jeffrey M. Green. New  
York: New York University Press,  
1989. 293 pp. \$35.00.

By KEN FRIEDEN

A quarter-century after S.Y. Agnon received the Nobel Prize for Literature, his work is still unfamiliar to many American readers. While the paucity of English translations of his Hebrew fiction is partly to blame, their continued obscurity also reflects the inadequate critical response, in English, to Agnon's writing.

Gershon Shaked's recent book, "Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist," guides us through a labyrinth of artistic treasures, effectively meeting the interpretive challenge posed by Agnon's complex stories and novels.

Mr. Shaked's book joins a handful of English and American monographs that deal with the master of 20th-century Hebrew prose. By building upon his predecessors, in particular the work of Arnold Band, Mr. Shaked has produced the most effective introduction to Agnon that is currently available in English. His success may be traced to the combination of sensitive interpretations and sophisticated critical views; Mr. Shaked is deliberately eclectic in his approach, ranging from central themes to underlying structures, from Marxist to Freudian dimensions, and from intratextual to intertextual dynamics. Like other practical critics, Mr. Shaked avoids abstract theoretical issues and focuses on the specific meanings of texts.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon was born in Buczacz, Galicia, in 1888. Mr. Shaked's biographical summary is brief, since he is more interested in the literary output than in the author. Agnon had already begun to publish stories in Hebrew and Yiddish when he moved to Palestine in 1907. After Agnon left Jaffa in 1913, he lived in Berlin, Wiesbaden, and Hamburg until 1924, when his house — containing an extensive collection of books and manuscripts — was destroyed by fire. During this period, German translations of his fiction were published by Martin Buber's journal, *Der Jude*. Agnon was in good

company: Franz Kafka also published stories there in 1917.

Agnon moved to Jerusalem in 1931 and began to write his collection entitled "The Book of Deeds" (*Sefer ha-ma'asim*). Debate continues over the presumably "Kafkaesque" character of these tales. Mr. Shaked's book, however, sheds little light on the subject. In his cautious discussion, Mr. Shaked writes: "Kafka describes a world out of time and place, making the unreal become real. Agnon, however, used real materials rooted in concrete time and place and then deprived them of reality." Much more needs to be done to understand the intertextual connections between Kafka's German writings and Agnon's Hebrew prose.

Mr. Shaked makes unusual contributions to Agnon scholarship on the basis of his familiarity with the Yiddish literary tradition. Because he has authored a seminal book, in Hebrew, on S.Y. Abramovitch (Mendele Mokher Seforim), Mr. Shaked is able to provide rare insights on the relationship between Agnon and Abramovitch.

In connection with Agnon's career, this literary-historical context helps to explain why "his detractors argued that his works were anchored in conventions they despised." By referring to the Yiddish tradition, moreover, Mr. Shaked enables us to understand how one of Agnon's early stories was partially inspired by Sholom Aleichem.

Intertextual links between Agnon, the Bible and the Midrash are especially important. Mr. Shaked's excellent reading of the story "Agunut" demonstrates that Agnon's relation to his precursors is not simply continuous: "The traditional elements in 'Agunut' reveal the profound connection between Agnon and the Jewish tradition. The traditional elements also indicate the significance of the rebellion against tradition that is implied through the use of these materials." Agnon employs "pseudo-quotations" and a variety of other strategies, including parody, in his response to Judaic sources: "What began as innocent — though often acerbic — parody in the works of Mendele Mokher Seforim became grotesque parody in the works of Agnon. Agnon no longer made fun of the ancient text. He created an 'antitext' that appears to retain the traditional form, but the content has been replaced by his explosives."

This sensitivity to "high



S.Y. Agnon, the dean of modern Hebrew literature.

explosives" in the literary domain resonates with deconstructive criticism, which frequently alludes to the subversive potential of literature. At the same time, this violent metaphor mirrors Mr. Shaked's daily life in Jerusalem where he is a professor at the Hebrew University.

A constant theme in Agnon, according to Mr. Shaked, is the destruction of individuality by collective pressures. This pattern suggests both social and psychological meanings, as when "Jewish bourgeois society overcomes the hero's personality and his romantic dreams, thus forcing itself upon him." Apart from its sociological implications, this pattern applies to the author's uneasy relationship to his precursors. As a radical innovator, Agnon opposed the hegemony of a static tradition. Hence, "Agnon developed from a revolutionary author who struggled against the tradition and blessed the revolution to an innovative author who described through a new literary form the revolution that was taking place. He revealed through form and content that the new revolutionary reality did not create a new order but rather a decoherent anarchy that places man in a grotesque condition characterized by total disorientation.... Now that the tradition has collapsed, in the depth of his heart or in his subconscious he yearns to return to it."

Agnon increasingly honed his innovative strategies of writing, combining them with allusions to biblical and midrashic forms.

Influence preceded and succeeded Agnon. He both responded to prior Hebrew and Yiddish let-

ters and has been the determinative voice in 20th-century Hebrew. Mr. Shaked notes that "Agnon is what the formalists call a *grandfather* — that is, the figure who permits the grandchildren to rebel against their parents." He cites the modern Israeli writers Yehuda Amichai, David Shachar, A.B. Yehoshua and Aharon Appelfeld as authors who have followed the lead of Agnon's style. This double-edged history of influences, marked by extreme innovation, fully justified the bestowal of the Nobel Prize on Agnon in 1966.

Gershon Shaked is one of the most prolific, astute and profound critics of Hebrew fiction. He has drawn from the best of literary theory without dogmatically espousing any single approach. Nevertheless, this book owes a special debt to Harold Bloom, one of the most important American Jewish critics since the Holocaust. Mr. Bloom has elucidated the phenomenon of influence, interpreting the twists and turns by which great authors revise their precursors. Along these lines, Mr. Shaked shows that Agnon, as "revolutionary traditionalist," simultaneously relies on and rebels against the Jewish literary tradition.

Ken Frieden is a professor of Judaic literature at Emory University in Atlanta. His book, *Freud's Dream of Interpretation*, has been published by the State University of New York Press.