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Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist (review)

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The Walden collection on Roth is a timely addition to Roth scholarship and suggest that Roth's next book, which, given his fertility as a writer, surely will come along soon, will be worth reading.

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Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist, by Gershon Shaked, translated by Jeffrey M. Green. Modern Jewish Masters Series 3. New York: New York University Press, 1989. 293 pp. \$35.00.

The notion that the fiction of S. Y. Agnon, Hebrew literature's foremost author, is preoccupied with sentimental retrospects of days gone by, and is thereby disengaged from contemporary reality, is among the chief points refuted by scholarship. Like others before him, though in a new and unique approach, Gershon Shaked has amply demonstrated the same in his present, premier, study, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*. For while Agnon's fiction—particularly works lacking discernible links with actual experiences beyond the parameters of the fictional construct—might often seem remote and oblivious to reality, it was fully engaged with it. In fact, Agnon's stories present the author's *Weltanschauung*, including his view of the ethical responsibilities of the artist in the world. For Agnon, as Shaked notes, "historical events are internalized, intensified, and transformed in his work. . . . History becomes an integral part of the individuality of his characters and transforms the characters to become reflectors of major historical events" (pp. 6-7).

In this study, Gershon Shaked, among Israel's foremost scholars of modern Hebrew literature and one who has written extensively on Agnon and his fiction, has grouped together many of the insights and concerns occupying him through prior studies—Agnon's early years in *'eretz yisra'el*, Brenner and Agnon, changes in the author's art as exemplified by textual revisions, his style, parallel structures, irony and ambivalent feelings as to the Zionist enterprise—while breaking new ground with regard to a number of issues heretofore not addressed. Shaked's stated aim is "to capture the author's artistic character both factually and interpretively" (p. xi). To do so, Shaked—with the assistance of Jeffrey Green's generally lucid translation—has presented to scholars who do and do not read Hebrew a most enlightening, penetrating, and readable work of research on Agnon's literary corpus in the realm of the short story, novel, and novella. He does so by focusing on the theme of his study's title—an elegant concept wherein the single issue

unfolds a whole world of ideas—showing its multiple meanings while demonstrating the traditional and the revolutionary in Agnon's literary art. The study also draws attention to a number of Agnon's works heretofore given but cursory treatment.

Following a brief preface, Shaked sets out his study in six chapters. In each, he addresses one or several of Agnon's works, analyzing them from the point of view of their innovativeness and contribution to modern Hebrew literature. At each juncture, Shaked points out the affinities between the story discussed and the thesis of his work, each time demonstrating another aspect of Agnon's state as a revolutionary writer who maintained his ties with the tradition. The tradition, and the revolutionary departure, may have to do with either specific issues of Jewish classical texts, ideological matters in the realm of Zionism, religion, society, or metaphysics, or literary matters of form and content.

Shaked's oxymoronic title of the study aptly contains the gist of its thesis: whereas Agnon was relatively conservative in his choice of genres, he consistently broke new ground in extending their boundaries. For Agnon to play the role of a revolutionary traditionalist meant many things. And, as Shaked meticulously points out throughout the study, this apparent inconsistency has taken on various guises, some thematic, others intertextual, and still others technical.

As Shaked argues, Agnon's revolutionary role in modern Hebrew literature may be discerned in many ways. Thus, while employing similar themes as his contemporaries of the second *'aliya*, Agnon treated the subjects with a strong measure of ambivalence and irony, thereby exposing other writers' romanticism and disengagement with reality. In other ways, Agnon departed from traditional Hebraic texts by echoing them through numerous intertextual allusions which served as new texts or, as Shaked suggests, even antitexts or pseudotexts postulating a sophisticated reader able to discern them yet also able to recognize their subversiveness. To lend credence to his argument, Shaked amply illustrates these features as they apply to works such as "Agunot: A Tale" and many others. Agnon's modernism is also illustrated by what he does with traditional Jewish texts and, at the very same time, modern Western writers from Hamsun to Flaubert and Kafka to Gogol. In such ways, Agnon has also evolved from the "readerly" to the "writerly," from emotional sentiment to irony and restraint.

Another element in Agnon's revolutionary traditionalism is his ability to refresh traditional literary genres—such as the naturalistic story and the abstract, humorous feuilleton—by mixing them with each other, parodying them or embellishing them with intertextual complexity. A daring assertion made by Shaked, and which might be particularly appreciated by comparatists, is that Agnon's work on the novella has given new life to the genre.

Shaked categorizes Agnon's novellas as belonging to the traditions of the dramatic, psychological or lyric, and the grotesque. In his discussion of specific works, he spends a considerable time on the psychological underpinnings of "Betrothed" and the bases of the grotesque novella as exemplified by "Pisces," which also epitomizes Agnon's syntagmatic plot line. In discussing the latter, Shaked asserts that "Agnon might be termed the progenitor of the modern novella" (p. 206) in that his contribution reaches beyond the boundaries of Hebrew literature.

In addition, Shaked devotes a chapter to the examination of Agnon's major novels, from *The Bridal Canopy* to *A Simple Story*, *A Guest for the Night*, and *Only Yesterday*, and to his two posthumously published novels, *Shira* and *In Mr. Lublin's Store*. In each he finds evidence for the author's continuous growth, development, and revolutionary spirit. In each Agnon enfolds his response to the changes in mood and spirit of the times in which he lived. Discussions in other chapters are assigned to an analysis and evaluation of the author's various shorter works, giving the reader a good sense of Agnon's reach and depth.

Although one would have hoped for a more thorough, work-by-work, examination of Agnon's corpus, including his posthumously published writings, Shaked has presented scholars with a truly original approach to Hebrew literature's consummate intertextualist. In this seminal work, Shaked has set a high standard for those who might attempt to follow him. Readers of Agnon are advised to keep Shaked's study close at hand.

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Saul Bellow in the 1980s: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Gloria L. Cronin and L. H. Goldman. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989. 328 pp. \$25.00.

Saul Bellow in the 1980s is a collection of 18 critical essays published during the decade of the 1980s. The first eight essays are classified by the editors as "general" and the remaining pieces are listed as "specialized," those primarily dealing with individual Bellow novels.

The brief historical/chronological introduction attempts to place Bellow in context. The editors note three "waves" of Bellow criticism: the first (1966-74) gave rise to a number of major books on Bellow, which had in common "a celebration of Bellow as humanist and contemporary neo-tran-