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*Tradition and Trauma: Studies in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon*  
(review)

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## Book Reviews

**Tradition and Trauma: Studies in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon**, edited by David Patterson and Glenda Abramson. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994. 236 pp. \$59.50 (c); \$19.95 (p).

When Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970) received the Nobel Prize for Literature with the German-born Jewish writer Nelly Sachs in 1966, Hebrew readers could not have agreed more with the choice of Agnon to be the first Hebrew writer to receive this prize. To this day, most readers of Hebrew would agree with David Patterson's statement in the preface to this collection: "[Agnon] remains unquestionably the outstanding fiction writer in modern Hebrew literature" (p. ix). Some significant critical work on Agnon is available in English, including the following book-length studies: Arnold J. Band's *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); David Aberbach's *At the Handles of the Lock: Themes in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Gershon Shaked's *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1989); Anne Golomb Hoffman's *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); and Nitza Ben-Dov's *Agnon's Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1993). This new collection is a welcome addition to this growing body of Agnon criticism in English.

In the collection, which draws mainly on papers delivered at a conference organized by David Patterson at Mount Holyoke College in celebration of the centenary of the birth of Agnon in 1988, a number of ongoing issues in Agnon criticism are addressed. Particularly striking is the persistence in these papers of three issues: the difficulty of appreciating Agnon in translation, the comparison of Agnon to Franz Kafka, and the applicability of Freudian psychoanalytic theory to the interpretation of Agnon's fiction.

As David Patterson notes in his introduction, those who read Agnon in English translation often respond much less positively to his work than do readers of Hebrew, presumably because so much of the greatness of Agnon lies in his use of the Hebrew language. A central feature of Agnon's fiction that is conveyed only fully in the original Hebrew is his complex view of the Jewish tradition. The title of this collection, *Tradition and Trauma*, echoes the title of Band's study, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*. Both titles capture the conflict in Agnon's soul between a deep and highly knowledgeable attachment to tradition and a modern crisis of faith. To a certain extent, even in English translation one can appreciate the centrality of this tension between tradition and modernity in Agnon's experience. In her paper Judith Wegner Romney discusses the ways that in Agnon's novel

*Oreah natah lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*) the narrator's interactions with characters in his home town in Galicia make clear to him that while modernity may hold out no "viable alternative . . . to traditional Judaism," at the same time "[t]he ancient faith and values are gone forever; the gap between tradition and alienation cannot be bridged" (p. 117).

In the end, however, one can fully appreciate Agnon's ability to convey the complexity of the tension between tradition and modernity only by reading his works in the original Hebrew. In his analysis of Agnon's early story "Vehayah he'aqov lemishor" ("And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight") Arnold Band characterizes the Hebrew style of that work as "an artful pastiche of an older style . . . [in which] under the 'pious' text of the novella lay a subtext that qualified, ironized, or even subverted the text" (pp. 43–44). In her paper devoted to analyzing the first paragraph of Agnon's novel *Hakhnasat kallah* (*Bridal Canopy*), Esther Fuchs argues that "[o]ne of the most common pitfalls of allusion hunters is the premise that the Agnonic text not only echoes the themes, structure, and style of traditional Jewish literature but also endorses and promotes their underlying creeds and values" (p. 130). Careful attention to the original Hebrew style of the work reveals the author's ironic view of the Jewish tradition, which according to Fuchs "stems . . . from a deep-seated consciousness of the troublesome and often inadequate answers provided by Jewish traditional sources to the perennial questions of the existence of evil, the suffering of the righteous, and the tragic history of the Jewish people" (p. 120).

Agnon's Hebrew style serves the purpose of ironically portraying characters in both traditional and modern settings. In her analysis of Agnon's enigmatic story "'Ad 'olam" ("Forevermore"), Naomi Sokoloff comments on the role of the repetition of the Hebrew letters 'ayin and gimmel throughout the story in the ironic portrayal of its protagonist, the scholar Adiel Amzeh. "The obtrusive use of [these letters] in the text as initial letters of multiple words," she writes, "complements [the] understanding of Amzeh's convictions as poor judgment and misguided faith in referentiality. The bizarre repetition of the letters has the pronounced effect of highlighting and reinforcing the artifice of the work as a whole. Heightening an emphasis on sound, the author calls attention to the words themselves that make up the text and disallows any perception of language as simply a medium to convey an extratextual reality" (p. 18).

Anne Golomb Hoffman discusses the ways that in his novel *Temol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) Agnon makes use of the Zionist Hebrew rhetoric of his time to present an ironic portrait of the Zionist pioneer protagonist Yitzhak Kumer. Golomb describes this rhetoric as "language [that] buffers Yitzhak, although its ironic discrepancy with the situation at hand is not lost on the reader" (p. 53). For example, on the ship Kumer takes to the Land of Israel, when an old man asks him if he has relatives there, he replies, "Who needs them, all of Israel are friends, all the more so in the Land of Israel" (p. 53). The import of the original Hebrew, *kol yisra 'el haverim*, is much greater than the English, "all of Israel are friends." The original Hebrew expression, of traditional origin, conveys an intense sense of community commitment, which Kumer believes he will find in the Land of Israel, but

which, as the reader soon learns, is sorely lacking there.

In a comparison of what she calls an “‘existentialist’ hero,” the narrator of Agnon’s “Pat shelemah” (“A Whole Loaf”) with a folkloric hero, the tailor of Agnon’s “Hamalbush” (“The Garment”), Glenda Abramson notes the common lexicon developed by Agnon for both stories. One such lexical item is the root ‘qv, used in both stories with the connotations of “delay” or “distortion.” “Throughout Agnon’s writing,” observes Abramson, “the import of [this root] is negative: a metaphysical delay that must be redressed” (p. 76). In both stories the connections made among these verb roots contribute much to the ironic portrait of both the traditional hero and the modern hero.

One of the ongoing critical discussions of Agnon’s work is on the often-repeated comparison made between Agnon (particularly as the author of highly symbolic stories which he published in the 1930s and 1940s) and Kafka. As Arnold Band notes in his paper, when the comparison was suggested, “Agnon protested that he had never read Kafka except for . . . ‘Metamorphosis’” (p. 34). While, as Band asserts, the original assumption of readers of Agnon’s stories that Kafka influenced Agnon is overly simplistic, the overlap in historical and cultural context of both writers suggests that there may be valid points of comparison between the two writers. Indeed, Band himself, as well as two other contributors to the volume, Naomi Sokoloff and Anne Golomb Hoffman, draw comparisons between the fiction of Agnon and that of Kafka.

Some contributors to this volume apply a psychoanalytic approach to the reading of Agnon’s fiction. Given the persistence of such approaches in literary criticism in general, this is not surprising. In addition, however, Agnon’s fiction does lend itself to Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Perhaps this is because, as Band argues, Freud’s writings may have directly influenced Agnon. On the other hand, as Nitza Ben-Dov surmises, Agnon may have discovered insights central to psychoanalysis on his own, even before reading Freud. Nevertheless, as with the issue of the influence of Kafka, we can at least say that Agnon and Freud overlapped sufficiently in historical and cultural context to make comparisons between their views of human nature instructive.

Two papers discuss Agnon’s portrayal of male homosexual desire as a barrier to heterosexual relations. David Aberbach’s paper compares what he calls “signs of latent homosexuality” in characters in the fiction of Mendele and Agnon, “most strikingly, their often-strange dreams and fantasies in which sex roles are confused and identities reversed” (p. 169). In commenting on the ambivalent attitude of the narrator in “Harofei ugerushato” (“The Doctor’s Divorce”) toward his wife and her former lover, Miri Kubovy asserts that the narrator engages in “behavior [that] seems to be in line with the Freudian claim that ambivalence and paranoia serve the purpose of a ‘defense against homosexuality’” (p. 189). Anne Golomb Hoffman writes of the oedipal rebellion of Yitzhak Kumer against his father (as a representative of Diaspora Judaism) in *Temol Shilshom* (Only Yesterday), which is repeated in Jerusalem when the dog on which Kumer had painted the label “mad dog” attacks the religious fanatical father of a young woman to whom he is attracted. Also

drawing in part on Freudian psychoanalytic theories, Edna Amir Coffin's analysis of the story "Yedidut" ("Friendship") is based on an understanding that much of the meaning of the story is in the tension between the manifest motivations of the narrator and the latent issues with which he is dealing, but of which he is not consciously aware.

Unique among these papers is a personal statement by the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld. He describes how shortly after arriving in Israel in 1946, Agnon often visited him and his fellow Holocaust survivors in their settlement, which was located near Agnon's home in Jerusalem, "to ask questions and tell us jokes" (p. 207). Since Agnon's home town of Buczacz was not far from Appelfeld's home town of Czernowitz, the older writer was able to supply the younger writer with details about his past that he had repressed as a result of the trauma of the Holocaust. When in the 1950s Appelfeld turned to the writing of fiction in Hebrew, "probably," he writes, "to open the darkness in me, to say something of my experience" (p. 210), he could not find models in contemporary Israeli literature. Instead, the European-born writers Kafka and Agnon served as his models. "If Kafka introduced me to my assimilated parents," writes Appelfeld, "Agnon opened the gates of oblivion and brought me to my grandparents, to my hidden home where belief was in full flame" (p. 211).

Many of the works by Agnon discussed in these papers are available in English translation. (A notable exception is the novel *Temol shilshom*). This book, therefore, can serve not only as a resource for scholars active in the field of modern Hebrew literature, but also as an insightful guide for readers of Agnon in English translation as they seek to understand the complex fictional world of this unrivaled master of Hebrew fiction.

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**Relations Between Jews and Poles in S. Y. Agnon's Work**, by Shmuel Werses. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994. 128 pp.

What prominent features characterized the relations between Jews and Poles? What cultural elements were transferred between these two societies? How do Jews perceive their millennium-long sojourn among Poles? These are among the central questions addressed by Shmuel Werses in his study, *Relations Between Jews and Poles in S. Y. Agnon's Work*.

To describe that symbiotic state by relying on fiction as evidence, the approach taken by Werses in this study, threatens to jeopardize the thoroughness of the presentation, including that measure of "objectivity" we find in works of history. Yet there is nothing more fitting to enliven dry facts, to make people and events come alive, than a literary