

AGNON ACUMEN

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A review of

The Toby Press S. Y. Agnon Library. Edited by Jeffrey Saks. 12 vols. New Milford: Toby Press, 2008–2016.

1. INTRODUCTION

As devoted readers celebrate the writing of Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970) in this jubilee year of his Nobel Prize for literature (1966), an ambitious project to publish most of the writer’s significant works in English translations is nearing completion. The *Toby Press S. Y. Agnon Library* is to be commended particularly for the forewords and annotations that accompany the translations because they offer contexts, nuances, and literary treasures commonly lost in translation. Exemplars are adduced in the discussions of these features below.

Agnon’s fiction concentrates on several central concerns, within which he asserts himself as an acute observer of character and the nature of the human spirit.¹ The author is as attuned to the psyche as he is to interpersonal and metaphysical relationships. His primary foci include the decline of old-world Eastern European *shtetl* life and erosion of piety; quests for adjustment to modernity and to the ethos of collectivity in the emergent State of Israel, which encroaches on individuality and autonomy; and issues of wholeness and cohesion, or lack thereof, in matters of the heart, the soul, and Jewish peoplehood. Agnon’s realistic, surrealistic, and symbolic emphases within these spheres range from nostalgia to nightmare, from frenetic endeavor to disastrous stasis, from mild preoccupation with personal predilections to full-blown obsessions, and from devout reverence to loss of spiritual direction.²

¹ Agnon also authored several non-fiction texts, including *High Holidays* (1938), a compendium of practices, *aggadot*, and commentaries, *Book, Writer, and Story* (1938), dealing with various aspects of literary craft, and the liturgical “Introduction to the Kaddish” (1947).

² See A. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

2. THE SCOPE OF THE SERIES

With some thematic rearrangement, the *Toby Press S. Y. Agnon Library* selects from among the works that Schocken published during Agnon's lifetime and collated in hardcover collections starting with a four-volume anthology in 1931.³ Among these collections was an iconic six-volume set known fondly in certain circles as *הש"ס האדום* 'The Red Talmud'.⁴ The *Agnon Library* also presents some of Agnon's posthumously published material that Schocken incorporated in a 23-volume anthology at the turn of the twenty-first century (1998–2003).

The series boasts an updated, annotated translation of Agnon's last published book. Arguably the *magnum opus* among his novels, *Shira* contemplates "the role of art in human reality."⁵ At once a nineteenth-century European novel and a "modernist demonstration of the collapse of [its] thematic concerns and formal strategies," the work, which appeared posthumously, gathers 1949–1952 installments from yearbooks of the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, along with two more chapters published following Agnon's 1966 Nobel Prize, and presents two versions of the last chapter.⁶ The new tome includes a first-time translation and introduction to archival material by Jeffrey Saks. Also included is "At Professor Bachlam's"—a chapter-length satire originally excised by Agnon from the novel and returned to the second edition by his daughter, Emuna Yaron.⁷ It conveys the strained relationship between the narrator (Shai Agnon *in propria persona*) and Professor Bachlam, who stands for the historian and literary scholar Joseph Klausner, his neighbor and colleague. Saks speculates that Agnon was aware that the "high farce and (a) bitter skewering of the pompous academic" was excessively acerbic and threatened to exacerbate his already fraught relationship with Klausner.⁸ The

³ The *Agnon Library* places the political satires "Young and Old Together" in the same volume as *The Book of the State* and separates them from the distinct material of "The Book of Deeds." On the latter within the larger context of Agnon's writings, see G. Scholem, "S. Y. Agnon: The Last Hebrew Classic?" in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* (ed. W. J. Dannhauser; Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2012), pp. 93–116.

⁴ Schocken began publishing Agnon's work in the early 1930s, including *Agunot*, which had already appeared in the journal *Haomer* (1908), and a revised version of "And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight," an early novella that Yosef Haim Brenner chose to publish on its own as Agnon's first book (1912). In fact, Agnon had published approximately seventy works—prose and poetry—in Hebrew and Yiddish while living in Galicia. He continued writing in Hebrew after moving to Palestine in 1908.

⁵ R. Alter, "Afterword," in *Shira* (S. Y. Agnon; Toby Press S. Y. Agnon Library; New Milford: Toby Press, 2013), p. 771.

⁶ R. Alter, "Afterword," p. 774.

⁷ S. Y. Agnon, *Shira*, pp. 747–753.

⁸ J. Saks, introductory note to "At Professor Bachlam's," in *Shira*, p. 747.

novel is preceded by an analytical foreword of the literary scholar Robert Alter and accompanied by photographs of artwork by Böcklin, Breugel, and Rembrandt mentioned in it.⁹

The series integrates an adapted translation of illustrated text in *From Foe to Friend*, formatted as comics for young readers, corresponding to Shay Charka's graphic collation of three fables. Were "The Fable of the Goat" not so tragic (an ailing father loses contact with his son and access to a secret route to the land of Israel and its naturopathic resources previously provided in the goat's milk), some might find Charka's visual conflation of a goat with a cow's udder comical. Illustrations also appear in *Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town*. A black and white line-drawing precedes each of its novellas.¹⁰

The *Agnon Library* encompasses earlier translations, some updated by the original translators (as Zeva Shapiro has done for *Shira*), some by Saks (for example, Walter Lever's renditions of "Betrothed" and "Edo and Enam" in *Two Tales*), and others by the original editors (Alan Mintz and Anne Golumb Hoffman in *A Book That Was Lost: Thirty-Five Stories*).¹¹ A new introduction by the critic Hillel Halkin accompanies his existing translation of *To This Day*. Recent and new translations are also included, such as those of *A Simple Story* by Halkin complemented by his afterword, "Young and Old Together" by Paul Pinchas Bashan and Rhonna Weber Rogol, and parts of "The Book of State" (introduction and two chapters, "The Orange Peel" and "On Taxes") by Sara Daniel. In *Forevermore and Other Stories of the Old World and the New*, Saks makes some compositions accessible for the first time in English, several in his own translations, as well as gathers and revises translations from periodicals that have not been previously anthologized. Forthcoming volumes will include critical introductions and translations by such literary scholars as Glenda Abramson (*In Mr. Lublin's Store*), Michael Kramer (*And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight*), and Mintz (*A City in Its Fullness*, co-edited by Saks).

In overseeing the compilation of this complex and inherently diverse collection, Saks interpolates a number of incisive forewords providing overarching themes, textual analysis, and editorial comments. His insights are added to those of leading Hebrew literary critics, among them Ariel

⁹ S. Y. Agnon, *Shira*, pp. 778–781.

¹⁰ A looping illustration of "Stray Dog" by Avigdor Arikha showing multiple, linked figures appears before "Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town." Herzl Rome's picture of Hananiah polishing the lamps of the House of Study, drawn for the 1948 edition of "In the Heart of the Seas," ushers in that novella. Yosl Bergner's sketch of a throng of Szybusz abodes, originally designated for *A Simple Story*, precedes "In the Prime of Her Life." Arikha's line drawing of the elderly woman whose identity is intimately intertwined with that of Jerusalem introduces the novella "Tehilla."

¹¹ The latter volume contains additional material edited by Nahum N. Glatzer.

Hirschfeld, Dan Miron, and Gershon Shaked, and those of Agnon's older colleagues and younger contemporaries, including Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Gershom Scholem. The forewords build a literary history by furnishing publication details of the original Hebrew works and English translations. They also point out references to Agnon's writing in contemporary prose, for instance, in Amos Oz's novels *My Michael* and *A Tale of Love and Darkness*.

To certain volumes, Saks adds annotated academic bibliographies.¹² The publications included in them attend to Agnon's individual works as well as to language and leitmotifs, methodologies, intertextuality and "intratextuality," motifs, and themes.¹³ Among the latter, especially important are prototypically Agnonian phenomena spanning his oeuvre: עגונות—"anchored souls," deserted and left in limbo, prevented from realizing love; love triangles; missed opportunities; intentions sabotaged by inertia or fatal foibles; self-aggrandizing leaders and self-important committees oblivious to the wishes and welfare of individuals or the masses; multi-vocal narrators; Eastern European life of yesteryear, life in emergent Israel, and life in general as anything but simple.¹⁴

In offering recourse to the elements that are too often sacrificed in translation, the forewords and comprehensive annotations are the *tour de force* of the *Agnon Library*. Saks refrains from cluttering the texts with notation numerals: his comments, some with photographs, follow selected compositions. The next two sections of the review will provide illustrations of this strategy, concentrating first on the translations and then on the commentaries.

¹² Only English publications are included. Among them are the studies by David Aberbach, Robert Alter, Arnold Band, Nitza Ben-Dov, William Cutter, Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, Risa Domb, Theodore Friedman, Harold Fisch, Roman Katsman, Lea Goldberg, Yael Halevi-Wise, Baruch Hochman, Yair Mazor, Alan Mintz, Amos Oz, Astrid Popien, Gershon Shaked, Harvey Shapiro, Naomi Sokoloff, Hillel Weiss, Ruth Wisse, and A. B. Yehoshua.

¹³ One example of "intratextuality" is that the name of Agnon's son, Hemdat, keeps popping up in many different stories as that of the narrator.

¹⁴ The term is the source of Agnon's assumed last name. He signed his early works "Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes." The surname Czaczkes was derived by his great grandfather from the place name "Buczacz." On Agnon's writing, see also: E. E. Urbach, מחקרים ותעודות: ש"י עגנון (S. Y. Agnon: Studies and documents; ed. G. Shaked and R. Weiser; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978); B. Kurzweil, מסות על סיפורי ש"י עגנון (Essays on the stories of Shai Agnon; Jerusalem: Schocken, 1963); M. Tochner, פשר עגנון (Readings in Agnon; Tel Aviv: Aggudat Hasofrim; Masada, 1968). On his life, see: D. Laor, חיי עגנון: ביוגרפיה (S. Y. Agnon: A biography; Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998); S. Y. Agnon, מעצמי אל עצמי (From myself to myself; Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976); S. Y. Agnon and E. Agnon, (1931-1924) אסתרליין יקירתי: מכתבים תרפ"ד-תרצ"א (Esterlain, my beloved: Letters [1924-1931]; Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1983).

3. TRANSLATIONS

Saks chooses translations that balance the literal and the lyrical.¹⁵ He decides when to render references to classical texts and special allusions, such as those to a poetic fragment by Shin Shalom recurring in *Shira*, and when to skip wordplay that is not susceptible to elegant translation, as he does in “Young and Old Together.”¹⁶ In the latter case, Saks provides an explanation in the annotation.¹⁷

By and large, the revisions respect the work of the initial translators, occasionally extending it. Resolved is the mystery of the missing segment at the end of Jules Harlow’s original rendition of “Peace Everlasting” which has caused more than one researcher to request an interlibrary loan.¹⁸ The restored piece serves as a historical and thematic segue to a subsequent composition, without which the previously omitted text would not have made sense. Occasionally, a new translation forays too far into contemporary vernacular: “Having described how the State was delivered from its domestic enemy, we are obliged to tell how the foreign enemy besieged the State to make war. But now is not the time to talk of such things, since we are *tasked* with fighting obligatory wars against our enemy.”¹⁹ For the most part, however, Agnon’s turns of phrase are matched with parallels that hew to the language register and tang of each composition’s and speaker’s locale, ancestral roots, and cultural milieu. Select terminology of intersecting stories has been harmonized throughout: for example, in chapters from *The Book of State*, שפתותיים—the site designated for wordy deliberations—is consistently rendered as “Lippery.” Previous renditions such as “Tonguey” have been edited out.

¹⁵ J. Saks. “Preface” in *Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town and Other Novellas* (S. Y. Agnon; Toby Press S. Y. Agnon Library; New Milford: Toby Press, 2014), p. xiii. Zeva Shapiro comments on “yielding to...the exquisite blend of austerity and lyricism” (Z. Shapiro, “Agnon’s *Shira*: A Translator’s Afterthoughts,” in *Shira*, p. 796).

¹⁶ Agnon’s work is replete with biblical references and enriched with his extensive knowledge of Talmud and haggadah acquired during his youth in Buczacz, Hasidic lore imbibed in the *kloyz* of the Czortkov Hasidim, and writings of the *maskilim* of his Galician surroundings. He learned German, independently read the early Modern Hebrew writings of Bialik, Tchernichovsky, and Ahad Haam, and was familiar with the prose of Yiddish, German, and Scandinavian authors, even some Shakespeare in translation (see D. Laor, *S. Y. Agnon*, pp. 13–48). The line of Shin Shalom (Shalom Joseph Shapira) “Flesh such as yours / Will not soon be forgotten” accompanies the urgent quest of Manfred Herbst for שירה ‘poetry, art’.

¹⁷ J. Saks, “Illustrated Annotations to ‘Young and Old Together,’” in *The Orange Peel and Other Satires* (S. Y. Agnon; Toby Press S. Y. Agnon Library; New Milford: Toby Press, 2015), p. 115 n. 57a.

¹⁸ S. Y. Agnon, “Peace Everlasting” (trans. J. Harlow), *Conservative Judaism* 19 (1965): 32–39.

¹⁹ S. Y. Agnon, “Peace Everlasting” (trans. J. Harlow), in *Orange Peel*, p. 146 (emphasis added).

An obvious benefit of the translations is the accessibility of their content and thrust for an international English readership, which is much wider than the pool of Hebrew readers currently scrutinizing Agnon's works for pleasure or study in Israel and beyond. Among the consequences of placing his Nobel-winning writing on the global literary stage is the potential for generating greater international awareness of his work—and of Hebrew letters altogether—by advancing scholarship that involves Agnon's oeuvre in the arena of comparative literature.²⁰

4. FOREWORDS AND ANNOTATIONS

In formulating these, Saks displays encyclopedic knowledge of Agnon's corpus, scholarly literature on it, demographics of its characters, and the environments in which the author developed and worked. Combined with thorough conversance with classical Hebrew texts, familiarity with world literature, and facility with languages, that knowledge contributes to Saks's Agnon acumen and positions him to offer enlightening comments on hundreds of textual components. It would not be surprising if the *Agnon Library*, most volumes of which are already formatted for e-readers, is digitized with hyper-text in the future: the colossal preparation is complete in the form of the annotations.

The foreword to "Introduction to the Kaddish," for example, goes beyond conveying observations of literary scholars and salient themes, elements that are *de rigueur* in the series.²¹ It also provides several forms of context, neither readily apparent in translation nor necessarily obvious to all contemporary readers of Hebrew. Thus, the readers are apprised that the format of the piece approximates that of a *petiha*, a formal preamble to a canonical prayer, and the Kaddish itself is identified as the central allusion.²² Saks ensures that the audience understands its religious context and the significance of its recitation, intercalating a succinct explanation that one of its functions is to pray for God's name to "be magnified on high to rectify...diminution caused by the loss of each member of the collective below."²³ As far as historical context is concerned, a reference is made to the contention of James Diamond that "the expansion of the well-known Kaddish was necessary in 1947, as the tally of

²⁰ For some comparative studies of Agnon, see A. G. Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), pp. 23–40 and 41–56.

²¹ J. Saks, "The Metaphysics of Agnon's Political Satire," in *Orange Peel*, pp. vii–xvii.

²² This form is one of the conventions of *piyyut*, Jewish liturgical poetry.

²³ J. Saks, "The Metaphysics," p. xvi.

the Six Million was still being undertaken, and the human sacrifices in defense of the fledgling Jewish homeland were growing day by day.”²⁴ The editor thus leaves no doubt that the work is a serious liturgical composition rather than one of Agnon’s many satirical “pastiche[s] of holy source material in an ironic subversion of those pious texts” and thereby provides a literary context.²⁵ He elucidates the serious tone of the text in question and its placement as a coda to *The Book of State*, whose stories refer to external and internal enemies of the Jewish community in Palestine in the waning days of the British Mandate and early days of the young Israel, developing both literary and historical contexts. Finally, a parenthetically phrased editorial remark offers important cultural context for readers who are not familiar with Israeli commemorations: “Introduction to the Kaddish,” translated by Samuel Dresner, “is still ceremoniously recited at Memorial Day events throughout Israel.”²⁶

The annotations enlarge on the contexts illuminated in the forewords. They routinely confirm the sources and figurative weight of allusions, interpreting their interactions with the primary text to reveal nuances whose traces are generally imperceptible in translation. Such is the case, for example, with personal names through which Agnon instantly transmits aspects of character.²⁷ In this way, the annotation to “Amnon and Tamar” goes beyond straightforward recognition of the biblical characters involved and the narrative featuring them (2 Samuel 13), adding that the names are “used idiomatically throughout *Shira* as a term for ‘(star-crossed) lovers’ in light of the rape of Tamar by Amnon.”²⁸ By highlighting a recurring motif, the note supplies valuable “insider information” for those not acquainted with Agnon or the Hebrew Bible, to which modern Hebrew literature makes innumerable allusions.²⁹

An annotation to the alternative version of the last chapter of *Shira* explains why deliberations over the naming of the Herbsts’ son mention Rabbi Shlomo Yehuda Rappaport, a proponent of Haskalah—the Jewish Enlightenment movement. If named after this notable, “known by his acronym, Shir,” the baby “would bear a masculinized hint to the name *Shira*.”³⁰ The note thus

²⁴ J. Saks, “The Metaphysics,” p. xvi.

²⁵ J. Saks, “The Metaphysics,” p. xvi.

²⁶ J. Saks, “The Metaphysics,” p. xvi.

²⁷ On names in Agnon’s corpus, see S. Hadad, “‘A Thousand Names They Called Him’: On Naming and Proper Names in the Work of S. Y. Agnon” (Ph. D. thesis, Columbia University, 2012).

²⁸ J. Saks, “Annotated Glossary,” in *Shira*, p. 799.

²⁹ On biblical reverberations, see T. Carmi, ed. and trans., *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1981), pp. 47–48.

³⁰ J. Saks, “Annotated Glossary,” p. 806.

restores the acronym that is undetectable in translation and grants access to its nuance, symbolic in light of the book's title and Manfred's muse. Another emblematic name, this time in Yiddish, is Schrieholz in "The Kidnappers." The annotation clarifies that it means "Screaming Tree"—a jibe at the speech-making politician character who bears it—and links it to the third president of Israel, Zalman Shazar (Shneur Zalman Rubashov), who was "known as a flowery orator."³¹

The place name Sybusz, addressed in one of the forewords as an encoded reference to Buczacz, is the "literary doppelganger" of Agnon's birthplace in Polish Galicia, now part of Ukraine.³² An annotation further reveals that this is a homophone for the Hebrew שִׁבוּשׁ 'error, defect'—a connotation that is not available in English but pivotal to the storyteller's assessment of life in the city as "mixed up or muddled."³³

The annotations also offer an array of support far beyond the subtleties of intertextual links and non-English wordplay. Some disambiguate indistinct terms, such as "Hasidim" and "Hasidut" of disparate eras and outlooks.³⁴ Others identify quotations and deliberate misquotations from liturgy, the Hebrew Bible, and traditional Jewish commentaries on it, Midrash, Talmud, legal codes, and Hasidic tales, as well as their importance for the primary text. Still others discuss influences of theater, prose writers, poets and philosophers, works of art, even slang. A note on "Young and Old Together," for example, explains the source and import of the novella's title, which alludes to a poem by Y. L. Gordon based on Exodus 19:9.³⁵ Historical background for commodities is likewise pointed out; for example, an annotation on "Tehilla" identifies "crown paper" as the official "stationery...of the Austro-Hungarian Empire."³⁶ In some cases, spatial and spiritual coordinates are supplied: with regard to "From Foe to Friend," the location of the Talpiot neighborhood relative to the Old City of Jerusalem is specified, and a note on "The Fable of the Goat" recalls the association of Safed with Jewish mysticism.³⁷ Personages and politics, committees, schemas, and schisms—all are recognized, and often as the targets of satire.

³¹ J. Saks, "Annotations to 'Chapters from the Book of State,'" in *The Orange Peel*, p. 165.

³² J. Saks, "Preface," in *Two Scholars*, p. viii.

³³ J. Saks, "Annotations to 'Young and Old Together,'" in *Orange Peel*, p. 106.

³⁴ J. Saks, "Annotated Glossary," in *Shira*, p. 801.

³⁵ J. Saks, "Annotations to 'Young and Old Together,'" p. 105.

³⁶ J. Saks, "Annotations to 'Tehilla,'" in *Two Scholars*, p. 259.

³⁷ J. Saks, "From Foe to Friend" in *From Foe to Friend and Other Stories* (S. Y. Agnon; Toby Press S. Y. Agnon Library; ed. S. Charka and J. Saks; New Milford: Toby Press, 2014), p. 7; J. Saks, "The Fable of the Goat," in *From Foe to Friend*, p. 33.

The forewords and annotations are at their best when their synergy helps the audience to comprehend the interplay of contexts, dynamics, and allusions with the primary text, and to construe their nuances. A case in point is “In the Prime of Her Life.” The foreword identifies a stylistic feature of the piece, its uncharacteristically sustained biblical phrasing, as a clue to the identity of its first-person narrator, the only woman playing this role in Agnon’s entire oeuvre. Saks explains that the author’s departure from his “typical Rabbinic mode” reflects the curriculum for girls “in early twentieth-century Galicia, the setting for the story” that conventionally included the Bible but not the Talmud.³⁸ The foreword thereby furnishes several key contexts—literary, linguistic, historical, demographic, and educational—in relation to gender. The subsequent annotation of the title conveys the gist of the allusion that it makes to the biblical Hezekiah who nearly dies in the prime of his life (2 Kgs 20:1–11; 2 Chr 32:24) and a talmudic text intimating that the king’s illness was a consequence of his spurning of potential marriage and children (*b. Ber.* 10a).³⁹ Together, the foreword and annotation impart meaning that is usually inaccessible in translation, preparing the readers to engage with nuances of the message developed by the primary text and having to do with family life. In effect, *Agnon Library* could function as a directed-reading course for the asking.

Clearly, without recourse to the forewords and annotations, aspects of Agnon’s writing would not fully register for an English-only audience. It also bears saying that his rarified language and trademark locutions—a personalized version of tannaitic syntax—can be opaque even to Hebrew readers who are not familiar with classical sources.⁴⁰ I would speculate therefore that if these resources were made available in Hebrew, and additional languages for that matter, we would see an upturn in the number of those reading and studying Agnon in Israel and around the world.

Of course, with *Agnon Library*’s apparatus readily available alongside reliable translations, the impetus to expend energy working on the Hebrew will be lost for some, together with the intellectual exercise of independent textual analysis. At the same time, those who do discover the depth of the features discussed and have some facility with Hebrew might well have all the support

³⁸ J. Saks, “Preface,” in *Two Scholars*, p. xi.

³⁹ J. Saks, “Annotations to ‘In the Prime of Her Life,’” in *Two Scholars*, p. 221.

⁴⁰ On Agnon’s language, see A. Bar-Adon, “S. Y. Agnon and the Revival of Modern Hebrew,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 14 (1972): 147–175.

they need to investigate Agnon's works in the original. Ultimately, any stimulus that arouses interest in the works of the Nobel laureate, in any language, can be considered positive.

5. CONCLUSION

The translations included in the *Toby Press S. Y. Agnon Library* grant English readers access to the author's compositions, including aspects of their particular turns of phrase. The annotated bibliographies point the way to the related scholarship. The forewords open doors to the texts and contexts that shape the writings and offer insights concerning their themes and interpretations. The annotations are particularly instrumental in offering readers and researchers, including specialists in comparative literature, "insider information" that helps them to become aware of subtle elements and features ordinarily undetectable in translation. In concert, the distinctive features of the series facilitate the audience's perception of essence and nuance in the interplay of texts, contexts, dynamics, and rhetorical devices, especially allusions, for enriched inferential reading and reception of Agnon's polyvalent writing.