

THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA
RABBINICAL SCHOOL

Spring 2004 LIT 7035y *The Modern Jewish Novel* Prof. David G. Roskies
Tuesday, 3:30-5:20

Course Objectives: To read the novel as the consummate form of Jewish self-expression in modern times; to explore the hidden continuities in this most protean and unpredictable of literary genres; to revisit the multilingual terrain of the Jewish experience.

Course Requirements: The class follows an animated lecture format, based on the assumption that students have done the assigned readings, both primary and critical.

Students are graded on the following basis: **Three writing assignments** 8-10 pages in length are due **on the designated dates**. Students may choose from among any of the themes that appear at the end of the syllabus--or may pursue a different angle. Each paper is worth one-third of the final grade and will be graded jointly by Prof. Roskies and his Teaching Assistant, Ms. Emily Katz. Students who wish to improve their grade may do so by submitting more than three papers. Their average will then be computed from the three highest grades. In these papers, students must grapple with the style and substance of the works we are studying. Only then may they earn the right to wax homilectical.

All titles are available for sale at Labyrinth Books on W. 112th Street. Just go to the back counter on the second floor and ask for "Roskies." \$175.00 will buy you a modern Jewish library. The very fact that these books are in print is culturally significant.

Office Hours: Thursday, 10:00-12:00. Unterberg 506. Ext. 8914.
daroskies@jtsa.edu.

On Wednesday from 12:00-1:00 and Thursday from 9:00-10:00, Ms. Emily Katz will be available to assist you with conceptualizing and fine-tuning your writing assignments. To make an appointment, you may e-mail her at emkatz@jtsa.edu, or nab her after class. Place TBA.

20 Jan. **Introduction: The Novel as a Form of Jewish Self-Expression**

Ruth R. Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture*, Introduction. Chicago, 2003, \$18.00.
PN842 W57 2000.

27 Jan. **Sholem Aleichem**

דער מילכיקער / *Tevye the Dairyman* (1895-1914), trans. Hillel Halkin. In *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*. Schocken. \$15.00.
Wisse, chap. 1.

3 Feb. **Franz Kafka**

Der Prozess / *The Trial* (1917). A new translation based on the restored text by Breon Mitchell. Schocken, 1998, \$13.00.
Wisse, 65-87.

10 Feb. **Isaac Babel**

Конармия / *Red Cavalry* (1924), in Isaac Babel, *Collected Stories*, ed. David McDuff. Penguin, \$14.00.
Wisse, 99-119.

17 Feb. **Isaac Bashevis Singer**

דער שטנאי נגאר י / *Satan in Goray* (1933). FS&G, \$14.00
Ruth R. Wisse, "Introduction" to the 1996 ed.

24 Feb. **S. Y. Agnon**

סיפור פשוט / *A Simple Story* (1935). Syracuse UP, \$19.95.
Hillel Halkin, Afterword to *A Simple Story*.

2 Mar.

Henry Roth

Call It Sleep (1934). Noonday, \$16.00.

Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Between Mother Tongue and Native Language: Multilingualism in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*." Afterword to the novel.

Wisse, 276-86.

9 Mar.

Primo Levi

Se questo e un uomo / Survival in Auschwitz (1946), trans. Stuart Woolf. S&S, \$12.00.

Wisse, chap. 6.

16 Mar.

Saul Bellow

Herzog (1970). Viking Penguin, \$14.00.

Ruth R. Wisse, "The Schlemiel as Liberal Humanist," *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago, 1971), chap. 6.

23 Mar.

Adele Wiseman

Crackpot (1974). Nebraska, \$11.95.

30 Mar.

Yaakov Shabtai

זכרון דברי / *Past Continuous* (1977), trans. Dalya Bilu. Overlook, \$16.95.

Wisse, 337-46.

20 Apr.

Philip Roth

The Counterlife (1986). Random House, \$14.00.

Wisse, 317-22.

27 Apr.

Meir Shalev

The Blue Mountain / רומן רוסי (1988). Canongate, \$14.00.

Writing Assignments

Choose any three

27 Jan. **Sholem Aleichem**

1) Wisse presents Tevye as a comic Rashi. Halkin, in his introduction, sees him as a comic Job. But what of the daughters?

At least two of the daughters, Hodel and Chava, mimic in some fashion their biblical namesakes. Hodel = Hadassa = Esther; Chava = Eve. How free are the characters to pursue their own fates if they are saddled with an archetypal overlay, harnessed to a preexisting plot, the offspring of a Bible-quoting patriarch?

2) For that matter, how free a man is Tevye? How does his manner of self-presentation square with his actual condition?

3) Tevye has returned to the land at the very moment when capitalism has taken hold in Russia. Where does Sholem Aleichem stand in this global contest?

3 Feb. **Franz Kafka**

1) How would we read this novel differently if the protagonist were named Josef Katz?

2) Wisse reads this novel as a multi-layered parody. Do you get the joke?

3) Fantasy has been defined as the hole through the fabric of reality. Where do such holes appear in this novel and what do they signify?

10 Feb. **Isaac Babel**

1) Who is Lyutov and what's his story?

2) Who is Pan Apolek and why does he loom so large?

3) Does Babel believe that a Jew with spectacles on his nose and autumn in his heart can actually turn himself into a Cossack?

4) If so--is this a good thing?

17 Feb. **Isaac Bashevis Singer**

1) In this, his first novel, Bashevis is experimenting with "demonic realism." To display his mastery, he writes two books for the price of one: a chronicle and a storybook, each written according to a different set of rules and each enlivening the powers of darkness in a different way. What is the relationship between these two demonic-realistic narratives?

2) In her introduction, Wisse speaks of two sets of rhetoric at work in the novel: the rhetoric of the law and the rhetoric of evil. Compare these or other such rhetorical styles that are at war with each other. Analyze the elements of their rhetoric which give them their awesome power to persuade. Examine their layered uses of language, history, and tradition in marshaling an interpretation of events which seem incontrovertible. Why do the true truth-tellers in *Satan in Goray* fare so poorly?

3) Rechele is an orphan in history. How so?

24 Feb. **S. Y. Agnon**

1) What kind of love story is this, anyway? Is it that the world around these characters is changing so rapidly or does the problem lie within? How does Agnon use the romantic plot to engage the reader's interest?

2) Is Hirshel mad? Is he the victim of a generational curse or of repressed desire? How does the answer affect our understanding of the novel as a whole?

3) How does the narrator's ornate and learned style square with the novel of bourgeois manners? In what sense is this a "double-voiced" discourse?

2 Mar. **Henry Roth**

1) There are a number of polarities in Roth's structuring of *Call It Sleep*: innocence/experience, kindness/cruelty, light/darkness, etc. The action of the novel shifts dramatically on several pivotal occasions when the innocent David Schearl is drawn unwittingly by others into the world of experience. These incidents seem reminiscent, mythically, of Adam receiving an unsolicited apple from Eve. Describe one or more of these incidents in *Call It Sleep* in terms of Roth's thematic usage of darkness/light.

2) How does New York City itself figure as a character, shaping the lives of those depicted in the novel? How does Reb Yidl's perspective on the city differ from that of the protagonist?

3) Who really "speaks" for the novel? For the city? For the experience of modernity?

9 Mar. **Primo Levi**

1) What happens to time in the *Lager*? How does the narrator lose and regain a sense of time?

2) How does the protagonist define himself in relation and opposition to other inmates? What are some of the key oppositions?

3) How does Levi signal the mythic/demonic dimension of the *Lager* experience?

4) What happens to language in the *Lager*? What is the relationship of Levi's own style to the debasement of language that he describes?

16 Mar. **Saul Bellow**

1) The schlemiel becomes a hero when real action is impossible and reaction is the only way a person can define himself. How does this definition match the character of Moses Herzog?

2) What happens to Herzog during the trial scene, and why?

3) How does Bellow use the epistolary form to lampoon the ideal of subjectivity?

23 Mar. **Adele Wiseman**

1) Through the reference to Lurianic Kabbalah in the novel's epigraph, Wiseman puts the reader on notice: Beneath the hijinks and bawdiness you must seek a deeper metaphysical and allegorical significance. So nu?

2) How and why does the novel build up to the climactic scene between Hoda and Pipick?

3) Is Hoda a proto-feminist? How does the novel form empower women?

30 Mar. **Yaakov Shabtai**

1) What themes and characters in Shabtai's novel make this a grand finale for all the Jewish political aspirations of the twentieth century as well as all the literary works discussed in this course? How, for example, do the relationships of fathers and sons inform and deform the Zionist dream?

2) What does Old Tel Aviv represent and what parts of it stand for the whole?

3) What is the relation of form to content? Whose "protocol" is it, anyway?

10 Dec. **Philip Roth**

1) *The Counterlife* is a now-classic exemplar of postmodernism, a highly experimental and destabilizing approach to reality. How does Roth put this style to Jewish use?

2) Exactly as in Shabtai's *Past Continuous*, the novel begins with a family sitting shivah. How do both novelists use this ritual moment to launch their story?

3) Is Christianity the counterlife to Judaism? Galut the counterlife to Israel?

27 Apr. **Meir Shalev**

1) Shalev brings us full circle: back to Tevye's dream of working the land and back to Mother Russia. What is Shalev's metahistorical message?

2) How does Shalev employ--and subvert--the conventions of a family saga in order to re-present the Zionist experiment?

3) How does magic realism differ from the fictional techniques we have studied thus far? Where, in classical Jewish sources, have we seen the likes of Old Zeitser before?