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איגוד הפרופסורים לעברית בארצות־הברית

A REVIEW* OF

SHMUEL YOSEF AGNON: A REVOLUTIONARY TRADITIONALIST. By Gershon Shaked. Jeffrey M. Green, trans. Modern Jewish Masters Series 3. Pp. xii + 293. New York: New York University, 1989. Cloth.

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It is rather astonishing to realize that almost twenty-five years have passed since the publication of Arnold Band's *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon.* That volume was an extraordinarily ambitious achievement. Band sought—in six hundred densely printed pages—to lay out the historical development of Agnon's corpus, summarize the plots of the stories, review the criticism, undertake his own original readings of the text, present a formidable and ingeniously organized apparatus which catalogues all of Agnon's writing (through their various permutations and versions) and all of the criticism, and to do all this in the manner that would reward the attention of both neophyte English readers and initiated Hebrew readers. Some have argued that the book crippled itself by trying to do too much, but in the end the sheer utility of the book and its abundant good sense have answered its critics. *Nostalgia and Nightmare* has made itself essential to anyone undertaking to write about Agnon.

Gershon Shaked's new work, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, is a third the size of Band's volume and carries only a modest critical apparatus. It is meant to be an introduction to Agnon, as befits its place in a series of brief overviews of "Modern Jewish Masters," and it is intended specifically for the English reader. Yet at the same time, Shaked's book is very ambitious in its own way. By virtue of its introductory mission, it endeavors to set the terms for the critical discussion of Agnon and to map the terrain of the major problems in his work. The kind of "mapping" Shaked engages in is not the preliminary surveying of unknown territory but the work of a master cartographer who knows every hill and valley and then chooses how to represent in simplified relief the general contours of the landscape. In the past quarter century, moreover, there is simply more territory to map. The black-jacketed posthumous works of Agnon threaten to take up as much space on the shelf as the white

* A refereed review essay.

covers published in his lifetime. There is a new body of Agnon criticism, as well, much of it written by younger scholars. Then there are the new (though not necessarily better) ways of reading which have been made available by recent developments in literary theory.

Shaked's book is, then, an important event in Jewish literary studies. Its contribution is made at two levels. On an objective level, the book offers a comprehensive guide to the major facets of Agnon's *oeuvre*: biography, influences, reception, the poetics of the prose, the development of style and plot, and a taxonomy of the genres and forms, in addition to a critical description of the six major novels. In his comprehensive references to the significant criticism written about Agnon's work, Shaked is careful only to locate and describe the contributions of other scholars; he assiduously avoids polemical judgments. At the same time, on a subjective level, Shaked's English introduction to Agnon can be usefully taken as an introduction—a kind of digest and precis—to the Hebrew *Shaked on Agnon.* Shaked's own contribution to Agnon studies over three decades, which are gathered in his books *Omanut Hasippur Shel Agnon* and *Panim Aḥerot Biytsirato Shel Shai Agnon*, stands as its own formidable scholarly edifice. Having an implicit summary of this important body of work available in English is in itself extremely useful. The principal illustrations in the present volume, a dozen or so texts analyzed in depth, are also taken from the Hebrew works. This too is helpful because it reveals the nature of Shaked's own revisionary convictions about the shape of the Agnon canon, that is to say, which works are, in his view, the most artistically accomplished and which features of Agnon's craft the most significant.

On the basic but elusive question of influence, Shaked offers come important correctives to prevailing notions. While not devaluing Agnon's Galician origins and his extended German sojourn, Shaked emphasizes the formative and dislocating impact on the writer of his years in Eretz Yisrael between 1908 and 1912. He argues for the need to view Agnon as a part of a wider phenomenon of the Second Aliyah and deeply connected to such figures as Y. H. Brenner, Berl Katznelson, Rav Kook, and Arthur Ruppin. Similarly, against the tendency to view Agnon as a kind of floating cathedral—a wholly unique phenomenon in Hebrew literature, Shaked insists on seeing Agnon as a writer who arises out of a matrix defined at the turn of the century by the works of Berdichevsky, Shofman, Gnessin, and especially Brenner, and before them by Mendele and Bialik. When it comes to the prickly question of influences exerted by Western literature on Agnon, Shaked concurs with the general recognition of the impact of

Scandinavian neo-romanticism of Jens Peter Jacobsen and Knut Hamsun but stresses the eventual preeminence of the controlled realism of Gottfried Keller and Flaubert and of Gogol's grotesque comic art.

The insistence of Agnon's modernity goes back to the criticism of Dov Sadan and Baruch Kurzweil, who forever revised the prevailing notion of Agnon as a re-embodiment of the pious storyteller. Shaked's contribution to the effort is to demonstrate how modernity is at work even when Agnon seems to remain most traditional. Anyone of moderate Jewish literacy who has ever read an Agnon story has a sense of how very many allusions to classical sources are at work in the text at any one time, even if he cannot identify them. Shaked goes beyond conventional theories of allusion and intertextuality to propose the concept of *pseudoquotation* as a key to Agnon's craft. A pseudoquotation, as defined by Shaked, "is derived from sacred texts—with many of the characteristics of those texts—but is a text that is itself outside of the sacred context" (p. 29). The pseudoquotation, then, is not a bit of tradition imported into the modern work of art but a newly fictionalized entity, even if it has not been ironically altered, which is rarely the case. In his analysis of Agnon's inaugural story "Agunot" Shaked shows how its pious opening "midrash" becomes an anti-model for the sacred model it invokes. "The secular and sacred are interwoven, and the reader does not know if the sacred sanctifies the secular or if the secular sanctifies the sacred. Indeed, the relationship between secular and sacred, and the fictive or real status of each, are perhaps the central themes of the tale" (p. 30).

Shaked is similarly good at putting his finger on the essence of what others have described only impressionistically. Readers have long been bewitched by Agnon's archaic style with its roots in biblical, mishnaic, and late Ashkenazic Hebrew, and they have wondered how this pseudo-naive instrument manages to narrate so effectively the range of existential and grotesque situations presented in the fiction. Shaked begins by showing that the mature classical style, though present germinally at the outset, developed in stages. Because of Agnon's habit of constant revision, the elements of his style are in a permanent process of reconfiguration. But the direction of change is clear: "The realistic and the romantic-psychological elements move to the background, while the mythic and metapsychological elements advance to the foreground" (p. 71). The achievement of the classical style results from a powerful tension between the uniformity of the language and the heterogeneity of the themes. The hallmark of the Agnonian sentence for Shaked is balance; each sentence divides into symmetrically weighted units,

a structure which produces not only a uniform rhythmic movement but a built-in emotional distance as well. The secret of Agnon's prose is that this linguistic norm is generally applied to all genres, themes, and plot situations; it is the variable gap between the classically measured language and the extremity of the characters' situations which changes.

> The stylistic norm is coherent and strong. Hence, each and every deviation from it immediately and intensively defamiliarizes the stylistic norm created by the author. That which had seemed to be balanced and coherent is actually deeply diversified and enormously disrupted. (p. 89)

It is these deviations and disruptions which Shaked savors and privileges, and they provide the key to his vision of the Agnon canon. Since Kurzweil's essay in the 1950s, the pinnacle of Agnon's art has been regarded by many as *Sefer Hamaʿasim*, a collection of allegorical parables told in a dreamlike syntax about the dilemma of modern religious man in a fallen world. Instead, Shaked would argue for the artistic preeminence of narratives which embody the grotesque and in which "decoherent" structure is balanced by analogical structure. This requires some explanation. Shaked illustrates what he means by the grotesque with an extended reading of a late novella titled *Mazal Dagim* (*Pisces*), which appears in the posthumous cycle of stories about Agnon's home town, *ʿIr umelo'ah*. The plot of the story—which concerns a large fish, a man who loves to eat fish, and an artist who paints pictures of fish—cannot be easily described, nor for that matter can Shaked's virtuoso analysis of it. Shaked's conclusion suggests the line of argument:

> This the grotesque intermingling: a man is like a fish, and a fish is like a man. The combination of the two creates a grotesque effect that is both humorous and frightening because the addressees realize that the combination is not an artificial or imaginary one but instead represents a human truth—one that is both frightening and attractive. (p. 201)

The effect, moreover, is achieved by summoning up a host of "intertexts" from the Talmud and other classical sources, whose parody intensifies and enriches the grotesque.

By decoherent and analogical structures Shaked refers to a phenomenon familiar to every reader of Agnon. Instead of having sustained and recognizable plots, most of Agnon's longer fictions seem to break down into a series of tangentially related vignettes and digressions. Most critics have taken this fragmentation as a symptom of Agnon's instinctive discomfort

with the Western novelistic tradition. So while his background in the hasidic tale might have prepared him to write first-rate modernist fables, Agnon was seen as not being at home with genres which required the sequential orchestrating of events and the coherent development of character. Shaked demurs. What may have been merely digression in Agnon's early career becomes a refined technique of intertextual parallels. As sequential plot recedes in importance, spatial form becomes Agnon's key method of organizing the long text. The reader in a sense becomes re-educated; he or she learns to give up the gratifications of conventional plot and to read more actively. By paying attention to the parallels and analogies among the many ostensibly unrelated various subplots, "digressions," and vignettes, the reader constructs a depth of fictional world unattainable through other means. Already evident in the later versions of *Hakhnasat Kalah*, and in *ʿAd Henah* and *Beḥanuto Shel Mar Lublin*, this compositional strategy reaches its pinnacle in *Oreaḥ Natah Lalun*, in which the decimation of Jewish life in Eastern Europe after World War I can be represented accurately only by a new kind of purposefully fragmented art.

In this rich and useful book there are only small matters to criticize. The subtitle of this study calls Agnon a "revolutionary traditionalist," and Shaked uses this term in an attempt to unify the varied topics of his book. This oxymoronic yoking of opposites is meant to convey Shaked's conception of Agnon as a decidedly modernist writer who appropriates the materials of the tradition in a way which reflects the revolutionary transformation of Jewish life in the modern era. Although I have no quarrel with the view, I find the opposition too elemental and reduced to be of the use Shaked wants it to be. When it is invoked, often at the end of chapters, the concept seems somewhat artificially summoned up for the sake of making connections to a larger picture. This effort seems unnecessary because the book is unified by the creative subject it addresses; "Agnon" is enough, and the many nuanced insights Shaked offers do not need to be drawn together into an overarching schema or label. Another minor annoyance has to do with Shaked's penchant for using many different literary critical terms at once. After making some substantial point, Shaked will characteristically "translate" this insight schematically into several of the different theoretical discourses of literary studies, whether formalism, psychoanalysis, reception theory, and so forth. This cross-referencing among theoretical terms is a heady exercise indeed and the sign of an immense intellectual grasp. At the same time, however, because these connections can only be broadly drawn, there is little room for subtle

distinctions, and the effect is somewhat at the expense of Agnon, whose work is forced into an array of pigeon holes.

A more serious problem has to do with the technical realization of the book. The translation is competent, but it is rife in undigested Hebrew idioms. While it may or may not be well advised to try to hold on to certain biblical allusions ("...the fathers ate sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge"), there is no excuse for what follows: "There is no proportion between the sour grapes and the setting on edge of teeth" (p. 238). The decision to cite the dozens and dozens of individual works of Agnon only in translation and not in transliteration must have been based on a mistaken belief that the book would be interesting only to those English readers who have no familiarity with Agnon in Hebrew. The book has much to say to those already at home in Agnon, and it is inconvenient not to have exact references easily at hand. In addition, the usefulness of the index is limited by the fact that it contains only proper names and titles and no conceptual listings.

These quibbles aside, this is a book which makes a large and enduring contribution to Jewish culture.