

It is no defense, either of Norrington or of his devotees, to adduce Beethoven's metronome markings as justification for these musical crimes. Any musician with experience in playing music by living composers knows that of all their performance directions, metronome markings are the least viable, consistent, and trustworthy. The reasons, very much applying to Beethoven, include distance in time from the work's actual composition, inexperience with the requirements of performance, a frequent disdain for the very fact of performance, and above all the composer's preexisting and complete knowledge of the content and structure of the music, a knowledge which no audience—and few performers either—can be expected to possess. Here, then, in the area of tempo, is ultimately where the en-

tire ideology of authentic performance comes apart: ultimately, the interpreter must find the right tempo for himself.

If there is no composer-provided certainty of tempo, it remains true that tempo in itself, in its direct ability to express mood and clarify structure, is the single most important determinant of the effect of a performance. The experience of listening to this music in Norrington's execution, with its slavish reliance on Beethoven's metronome markings, while at the same time remembering the performances of such conductors as Toscanini, Furtwängler, and Bruno Walter is, in a sense perhaps different from that which Shakespeare intended in *Henry V*, an experience of "minding true things by what their mockeries be."

If we have had the good fortune

to hear Beethoven in great performances, we can indeed mind true things. But what if we have not had this fortune? What if the prospective new audience—young, and for the most part ill-educated and often ignorant—comes to music believing what it reads in reputedly prestigious publications? What, in other words, if the future audiences for these treasures of our civilization think, as they are incessantly told, that they are being given the true Beethoven, when it is really, in the most important sense, a mockery?

I do not know where the flood of contemporary performances may be found that are now so needed to communicate this great music once again. I do know that for all their presumptive newness, the Norrington Nine are merely the latest version of an old assault on the corpus of beauty.

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## Fiction

# Agnon Without End

Alan Mintz

THE translation for the first time of a major work by S.Y. Agnon (1888-1970), the greatest writer in modern Hebrew, is sufficient cause for celebration; the fact that this work is a novel makes the event that much more interesting, but also more equivocal.\*

Agnon, who was born and brought up in Eastern Europe and moved to Palestine for the first time in 1907, most naturally displayed his narrative genius—and gained his early fame—in short fictions

which made ironic use of two traditional Hebrew forms, the midrashic vignette and the hasidic tale. When it came to writing novels, Agnon similarly constructed them by stringing together cycles of related stories. This resulted in sprawling, epic works which, despite their thematic intricacy and symbolic power, were always in danger of breaking down and breaking apart.

Agnon's transactions with the novel as a form encountered other difficulties as well. As the quintessential literary expression of the secular middle classes, novels required close attention to a particular set of themes: domestic relations, individual ambition, and, classically, adultery. This presented an immense challenge to a writer

who had deliberately cultivated the persona of a pious storyteller; yet as a modern writer Agnon could hardly avoid this challenge without dooming his work to provincialism. In a novel of fairly limited scope, like *A Simple Story* (1935), Agnon's grasp of the medium is masterful. The bigger novels, *The Bridal Canopy* (1937), *A Guest for the Night* (1939), and *Just Yesterday* (1945, still untranslated), are always fascinating yet sometimes unreadable.

*Shira* is Agnon's problem novel. He began writing it in the late 1940's and published many chapters separately in periodicals; then

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ALAN MINTZ is Robert H. Smith Professor of Hebrew Literature at the University of Maryland. His new book, "Banished from Their Father's Table": Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography, was published by Indiana University Press last fall.

\* *Shira*, by S. Y. Agnon, translated by Zeva Shapiro, with an afterword by Robert Alter. Schocken Books, 585 pp., \$24.95.

it was consigned to his drawer. Several more chapters appeared around the time he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966, and he was actively at work on the book in the years before his death in 1970. On his deathbed, Agnon asked that *Shira* be published in its incomplete form; it appeared a year later, and in subsequent editions, carrying alternative endings, one of which indicated a direction the novel might have taken but did not.

For the reader, this unrealized aspiration is no cause for lament. In the new English translation, what we have of the novel is equal to the best of Agnon and takes his writing into new thematic territory; that is no small thing. The workmanlike translation by Zeva Shapiro tends to be overly faithful to the singular patterns of Agnon's style, which has the advantage of suggesting what the Hebrew might be like, though it fails to recast Agnon as an author whose writing attains an independent embodiment in English.

*Shira* is set in Jerusalem in the late 1930's and centers on the figure of Manfred Herbst, a lecturer in Byzantine studies at the newly created Hebrew University. A scholar of considerable erudition and integrity, Herbst has bogged down in his career after the success of his first book; a new work, a monograph on the burial customs of the poor of Byzantium, lies scattered on innumerable index cards and shows few signs of ever being written and securing him his professorship.

Herbst's comfortable life—he has a protective and affectionate wife and two grown daughters—is disrupted when his wife becomes pregnant and gives birth to a new daughter. In the hospital's maternity ward, Herbst meets a nurse named Shira and begins an affair with her on the very day of his wife's delivery. Although he sleeps with her only a few times and she herself disappears midway through the novel, Herbst becomes obsessed with Shira. His work grinds to a halt; his family life becomes intolerable to him; and his psyche is delivered over to grotesque sado-masochistic dreams.

The main body of the novel in its present state leaves Herbst sucked into the downward spiral of obsession. The unfinished portion was apparently intended to lead up to the fragmentary concluding chapter Agnon attached to the manuscript, in which Shira is discovered to have contracted leprosy and to be living in a leprosarium. Herbst joins her there; embracing and kissing her, he willingly becomes infected with her disease in order to be with her always.

ADULTERY has been a staple of the novel since *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*; for Agnon, it serves less as an erotic theme than as a device for portraying the breakdown of a world view: the liberal German Jewish culture embodied in Manfred Herbst. Jerusalem of the 1930's as it is depicted in *Shira* is awash in German Jews—scholars, physicians, daughters of good families—who have fled Nazism only to find themselves at loose ends in an unfamiliar Zion. Their displacement is emblemized by many rare volumes and first editions of German classics that have come into the hands of Jerusalem booksellers as the impoverished refugees sell off their libraries to keep body and soul together. Although Herbst himself came earlier, before the rise of Hitler, out of vaguely Zionist motives and on the strength of an offer of a post at the new Jerusalem university, and although he has learned Hebrew and feels at home in Palestine, he remains very much the creation of German Jewish culture.

This is nowhere more evident than in Herbst's commitment to the vocation of scientific humanism as expressed in his scholarship. His researches into early Byzantine Church history are impelled by the conviction that the path to truth lies through the careful and dispassionate investigation of past events, no matter how seemingly removed from the exigencies of the present. This pursuit is undertaken in the esteemed and cherished company not of persons but of books, which become eroticized objects. (The novel abounds in vignettes of bibliomania and bibliophilia.) Yet

Herbst's soul has nothing of the arid pedantry of George Eliot's Casaubon in *Middlemarch*. His mind is steeped in German romantic poetry, and he makes notes toward the writing of a dramatic tragedy of his own. Politically, his liberalism extends to an identification with the Brith Shalom group, which in the Palestine of those days favored a binational accommodation with the Arabs. Even the family circle partakes of the German Jewish ethos: an intelligent and solicitous wife who insulates her scholar-husband from the nuisances of domestic life, and strong-willed daughters raised to be useful and independent.

For all its attractiveness, however, this blossoming of late bourgeois intellectual culture curiously displaced to Jerusalem is presented in the novel as being ripe for destruction. It is being obliterated at its source as the forces of nonrationality triumph in Germany. Herbst's wife Henrietta wanders among the offices of the British Mandatory bureaucracy in a vain search for immigration certificates for her relatives at home. The Arab attacks against Jews, which intensified in 1936, come uncomfortably close to the Herbsts' house in an Arab neighborhood of Jerusalem. Unbeknownst to Herbst, his daughter Tamara has become a member of an underground group set upon evicting the British by force. Even the world of the Hebrew University, with its largely German or German-trained professoriate, is less bent on the discovery of truth, however rarefied, than it is preoccupied with jealousies of rank and reputation. The utter secularity of Herbst's world, its radical and complacent alienation from the sources of Jewish faith, is underscored obliquely by the novel's intrusive narrator, who observes his subjects from a point of view much closer to the religious tradition.

THE agent who precipitates the disintegration of this world view is unlikely indeed. The nurse Shira, the object of Herbst's obsession, is neither young nor conventionally appealing. What attracts Herbst

about her seems to be the mannishness of her sexuality, its freedom and nihilism. She is disdainful of religion and ideology and finds her only fulfillment in caring for the sick and suffering. In contrast to Herbst's German civility, she, who comes from Eastern Europe, fascinates him with an account of her flight naked into the Polish snows in escape from her lover on their wedding night.

As a character, Shira is both overdetermined and underrealized. This touches directly on what makes *Shira* a problem novel, and on what makes the novel as a genre a problem for Agnon. We know little about the nurse. Herbst's contact with her is very limited, and midway through the novel, as I have mentioned, she disappears altogether. (The freckle-like protuberances on her skin, noticed in the first chapter, turn out to be the early signs of leprosy.) Yet the temptation to underestimate her role in the novel, to see her as, in essence, merely the exotic catalyst of Herbst's undoing, is contradicted by Agnon's naming the novel for her, by the narrator's insistence that his story is as much about her as about Herbst, and by the fragmentary conclusion in which the

two are united in a leprosarium. Shira is clearly very important to what Agnon wants to do in the novel, but the nature of that importance is never entirely demonstrated.

Most critics have sought to resolve this dilemma by invoking allegory, as Robert Alter has done in his eloquently argued afterword to the new English translation. Thus Shira, whose name means "poetry" in Hebrew, is understood as a figure for the subversive modernist fusion of eros and art; what circulates in Herbst's mind, then, is not the 19th-century poetry of sentiment, but a Nietzschean melody fueled by the darker forces of life and death. It is exposure to this troubling power that pulls down the foundations of the world built by German Jewish culture.

SUCH a reading of Agnon's novel, as with most allegorical solutions to literary puzzles, produces in the uninitiated reader a momentary thrill of recognition as the pieces suddenly appear to come together in a profound, overarching scheme. But the *frisson* of comprehension soon dissipates when one attempts to analyze *how* the pieces fit together. Whatever the meaning of Shira's

name, it is hard to see how so perverse and sketchily rendered a character can bear the weight of such large designs.

Still, in the end we cannot do without allegory of some kind. In *Shira* one senses that the inherent limitations of Herbst's world view are being exposed by Agnon not out of any pleasure in documenting its dissolution but out of a belief in the existence of some transcendent, alternative realm. The identity of that realm is never named, but its latent power is everywhere suggested. The transfiguring idea—call it what you may: art, eros, purity, spirituality—can simply not be accommodated by the this-worldly resources of the novel as a genre. For this reason I believe the novel could not be finished. Agnon's deathbed instruction to publish *Shira* in its incomplete state may thus have signaled his final acknowledgment and acceptance of that impasse.

We must be grateful, however, for his last-minute instruction, for there can be no other work of literature, however fully realized, which presents the contradictions of the modern Jewish imagination as powerfully as this incomplete masterpiece.