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*Shira* (review)

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*Shira*, by S. Y. Agnon, translated by Zeva Shapiro, afterword by Robert Alter. New York: Schocken Books, 1989. 585 pp. \$24.95.

Not many statements are as banal or nearly robbed of meaning as those which connect love with pain, lust with sorrow. "There are no happy loves," laments with touching charm the well-known French *chansonnier* George Brassens. However, banality may be phrased in faded, ragged rhetoric, but it is not necessarily void of truth. The Song of Songs is no less the Love of Loves, is no less the Pain of Pains. "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but I found him not; I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loves; I sought him but I found him not" (Song of Songs, II, 1-2). Time cannot diminish the power of interlaced love and pain in that verse.

*Shira* is a novel about the pain of love, about the destructive power of forbidden love, about the agony, humiliation, and deterioration with which love curses its chastised, doomed carrier. Once the novel's protagonist, Manfred Herbst, a middle-aged, happily married history professor in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, falls in love with the nurse Shira, the whole course of his previous life, which was serene, peaceful, and satisfactory, declines into humiliating degradation and ultimate personal and familial collapse. Like a hero in a Greek tragedy, once Herbst binds himself by his enslaving love to Shira, he painfully, but still soberly, treads towards an inevitable destruction. No wonder, therefore, that Herbst's attempt to compose a tragedy is stressed in the novel: he ironically labors to put together his own book of death. And the difficulty which Herbst encounters on portraying the slave figure in his tragedy is neither random nor surprising: it is no easy task to draw your own portrait, notably when it manifests the essence of your very weaknesses.

None of the loves in Agnon's works is a happy one; none is divorced from agony, frustration, downfall. *Shira*, in its intricate artistry, in its sweeping power, in its huge magnitude, is the very zenith of Agnon's love stories in which love, pain, frustration, and destruction amalgamate in one bleak equation. Some of Agnon's love stories are dominated by *la belle dame sans merci*, a traditional fatal figure of a woman who simultaneously encourages and rejects her lover, traps him in his uncontrollable attraction to her, and leads him to his downfall.<sup>1</sup> There is no *belle dame sans merci* like Shira. Indeed, she invades Manfred Herbst's life by his own choice. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Agnon was notably influenced by the embodiment of that fatal figure in August Strindberg's and Knut Hamsun's works. See also: Yair Mazor, *The Triple Cord: Agnon, Hamsun, Strindberg: Where Hebrew and Scandinavian Literature Meet* (Tel Aviv: Papyrus, Tel Aviv University, 1987).

once she trespasses into his life, she oppresses his feelings, she steals his peace of mind, she catches him in her snare, and eventually she dooms him no less than he dooms himself.

Herbst is not a tragic hero; he is not Oedipus Rex or King Lear. Herbst is an ordinary man whose encounter with Shira channeled his life towards a tragic orbit. Herbst's decline is metaphorically manifested not only by his attempts to compose a tragedy but also by his field of study, the history of Byzantium. The historical connotations of moral crumbling and physical degradation which are associated with the last days of Byzantium (modern Istanbul)—Herbst's academic interest—are one more mirror which reflects his own fate. In a symbolic daydream near the beginning of the novel, an "Istambulian" beggar embraces Shira, and they both shrink and eventually disappear in Shira's left sandal. The Istambulian beggar relates to Herbst, the beggar of love whose area of scholarly investigation is ancient Istanbul; Shira's embracing relates to Herbst's lust for Shira; the shrinking symbolically stands for decline; the sandal is a component of the erotic shoe motif (one of the novel's prevailing motifs which symbolizes Herbst's sexual frustration); and the reference to a *left* sandal emphasizes the sinister side (sinister=left), doomed Herbst's side. The fact that this is only one of a network of intricate symbolic junctures in the novel sheds a modest light on its formidable verbal weaving.

Herbst's fatal attraction to Shira is certainly the very heart of the novel. Nevertheless, the novel takes also other tracks which act like narrative satellites that surround the novel's main plot while providing it with a referential background: an anchor of context and milieu. These satellite tracks bring to life Jerusalem of the thirties and the forties, the social-intellectual environment of the Hebrew university, and the city's views, sounds, and flavors. In these satellite layers of the novel, countless components of atmosphere are artistically orchestrated, sensitively restoring a tale of one city. As in most of Agnon's works, the narrator of *Shira* is far from being only a rhetorical vehicle which "innocently" conveys the story. Although not entirely without pity and compassion, the omniscient narrator delivers his story for the most part with witty, critical irony. In this respect, Herbst is haunted by his narrator no less than he is haunted by Shira.

*Shira* is Agnon's last work, and he did not complete it before his death in 1971. Some of the novel's chapters have been published separately earlier. Agnon's daughter, Emuna Agnon-Yaron, went carefully through all the versions, notes, and drafts of the novel left by Agnon and compiled the fragments and parts. The novel's sense of completeness pays tribute to Mrs. Agnon-Yaron's work.

Amos Oz, the prominent Israeli writer, one of Agnon's most pious literary disciples, said once that reading a piece of literature in translation, not

in its original language, is like making love through a blanket. Adopting this metaphor, one may cogently argue that reading Agnon's literary work in translation, "disarmed" of its singular, unique Hebrew with its ancient, Mishnaic flavor, is like making love through a wall. However, in this case Zeva Shapiro's translation is a laudable attempt to enable *Shira's* English reader to appreciate Agnon's verbal genius despite the "immigration" of the novel from its original language into a "verbal exile."

Professor Robert Alter's afterword is the right scholarly homage to a master like Agnon, to a novel like *Shira*. "Shira," in Hebrew, is not just a female name. It means poetry. Poetry is not only a literary genre; it may also mean a sublime piece of literature of any genre. *Shira* is not only a novel. *Shira* is also poetry, a sublime piece of poetry which narrates the old, still always new agonized union in which love meets pain.

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**His Daughter**, by Yoram Kaniuk, translated by Seymour Simckes. New York: George Braziller, 1989. 293 pp. \$17.50.

Yoram Kaniuk's novel, *His Daughter*, is a breathless and claustrophobic quasi-detective novel, which continues the steady demolition of the Israeli super-hero that Hebrew novelists have been performing for a long time. Just as modern Hebrew literature has produced a variety of didactic, heroic models of the "new Jew"—the Jewish man of the world, the pioneering hero, the military hero of the War of Independence—Hebrew writers since the second aliyah have diligently debunked the images of such heroism.

In this book, Joseph Krieger fulfills our expectations of the "Israeli superhero," but that only makes him vulnerable to deception and manipulation by just about everyone. Krieger is a caricature, the last intact hero of the Palmach generation: a square-jawed, loyal, naive, incorruptible soldier and family-man, whose self-righteous honesty prevents him from satisfying the demands of others.

To crush Krieger's self-righteousness, Yoram Kaniuk musters a cast of co-conspirators, starting with his erratic European survivor wife, and including all the others who have been nearest and dearest to him throughout his life. Miriam, his neurotic, brilliant and allegedly captivating daughter, has disappeared and may have been murdered. The girl is morbid: since childhood she has been in love with a cowardly soldier under Krieger's command who was killed before she was born; she avenges his death and blames her father. Good soldier Krieger also has been betrayed frequently by his oldest