

highlights and creates spaces of textual and cultural interrelation, where sites of conflict activate and engage, as the poet herself described it, “the transparent skin that unites us” (p. 131).

*Adriana X. Jacobs*  
*Oxford University*  
*Oxford, United Kingdom*  
*adriana.jacobs@orinst.ox.ac.uk*

**AGNON’S MOONSTRUCK LOVERS: THE SONG OF SONGS IN ISRAELI CULTURE.** By Ilana Pardes. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 202. Paper, \$30.00.

In her vital contribution to Agnon studies, Ilana Pardes delivers a richly multifaceted exploration of the novelist’s illumination of the role of the Bible in early Zionist culture. Venturing beyond both early critics and contemporary scholars’ ardent attention to analogies between Agnon’s relation to midrashic hermeneutics and poststructuralist understandings of textuality would be a substantial achievement in itself, but Pardes has a more expansive ambition here, challenging the familiar conviction that in formative Zionist culture the Bible was an exclusively secular presence.

For Pardes, the interplay between secular and religious exegetical practices (the literal and the allegorical) in Palestine of the Second Aliya and after the establishment of the state of Israel, was far more intricate and fecund than often realized. The golden age of Israeli biblical culture throughout the 1940s and 1950s forms the stage for the compelling story she tells about both the Song of Songs and Agnon’s critical instincts about his society’s relation to one of its most seminal narratives: “Agnon’s deep commitment to Zionism only propelled him, with a greater sense of urgency, to hold up a critical mirror to its underlying utopian and messianic delusions” (pp. 28–29). Even as Zionists “sought to find in the land of Israel a Pompeii in which the actual biblical past was kept intact,” argues Pardes, “their quest for a new uplifting secular literalism... could not do away with the haunting presence of the more somber verses of the ancient love poem, nor could it limit the lingering impact of traditional allegorical configurations and the formation of new national allegories” (p. 29). Pardes’ point of embarkation on this journey is Balak, the enigmatic canine of *Only Yesterday* (Tmol Shilshom, 1945). In one of the most famous episodes of modern Hebrew literature, the protagonist Isaac Kumer inscribes the fateful epitaph “mad dog” on his back, an act that inspires a frenzy of hermeneutic decoding both by Balak and the diverse and isolated

Jewish communities of modern Palestine (ranging from the ultra-Orthodox press in Jerusalem to the secular Zionist intelligentsia in Jaffa).

Pardes' masterful reading of Agnon's language in this novel profoundly illuminates his use of irony and multiple perspectives, setting the stage for her subsequent exploration of the author's responses to Zionist culture's literalist engagement with the Song of Songs. Why did this become the seminal biblical text for both Agnon's literary art and the Zionist cultural imagination? According to Pardes, that owes in part to Ben-Gurion's insistence on its primacy as the biblical text most commensurate with Zionist secularism, his touting the "Song's original, secular grandeur" (p. 15) once the detritus of its allegorical layers, imposed over the centuries by rabbinic tradition, were (ostensibly) expunged. Whatever the appeal of such doctrinaire pronouncements, on a more visceral level (in the realms of art, music, and dance), the Song clearly proved irresistible to the Zionist imagination: "a founding text for imagining a new erotic freedom in the Orient, for defining the liberation of the senses from stifling European norms" (p. 49).

Pardes sees Agnon responding with relish to satirize Zionism's own allegorical orthodoxies in its uses of the text in rendering the erotically earthy dalliance of the Shulamite and her lover in the Song as an expression of the ancient/new love of the land. Especially given these warring certitudes, for a writer as playful and observant as Agnon it is clear that the Song of Songs would have proved a highly desirable touchstone, for its own inherently diverse and contradictory impulses must have seemed analogous to his own practice.

To clarify just how Song of Songs came to be employed by Zionist culture, Pardes nimbly traces earlier critical developments such as the exegetical revolution of the European Enlightenment in which readers such as Johann Gottfried Herder took a literalist turn emphasizing the Bible's expression of Oriental realities. This leads Pardes to consider the first Hebrew novel, Abraham Mapu's *The Love of Zion* (1853), where she identifies a distinctive newly fashioned Song of Songs "in which Zion's pastoral landscapes" form "a concrete part of the drama" and thus no less than the "inaugural site of the Zionist literalist approach to the Song" (p. 35) which Agnon's literary generation inherits.

*Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers* ranges significantly further than its title would suggest; among its fascinating tributaries is the account of the burgeoning realm of biblical botany that, like other disciplines, began with a literalism that metamorphosed into associating biblical flora, of which the Song of Songs contains the greatest variety, with allegories of Jewish national revival (as it turns out, Agnon had deep connections to the burgeoning Zionist botanical world). Later sections of this multidisciplinary study heed salient milestones in the portrayal of the Song of Songs in Zionist art (including

wonderful illustrative exemplars drawn from early Bezalel artists such as Ephraim Moses Lilien and others), music, dance as well as various scholarly discourses. Pardes recounts how during the 1930s and 1950s at least one hundred musical compositions were based on the songs; from the 1960s to the present seventy-five more (all helpfully cited in the appendix). Typically, these were the combined efforts of male Ashkenazi composers and female Yemenite singers, producing some of Israel's earliest hybrid Eastern and Western soundscapes and inspiring the nascent Israeli folk dance movement.

In the two concluding chapters, Pardes turns her attention to Agnon's metacommentaries on the Zionist rendering of the Song of Songs in his 1943 masterpiece *Betrothed* (*Shevu'at emunim*) and also "Edo and Enam." Alongside her own close readings she demonstrates the fascinating intertextual repercussions of Agnon's affinity for both Freud's psychoanalysis (a psychoanalytic institute established by a student of Freud flourished in Jerusalem in the forties) and Scholem's explorations of Jewish mysticism. As his art engages with these and other scholarly disciplines, Agnon's most characteristic mode is "both fascinated and amusedly critical" (p. 79), and Pardes uncovers intriguing ambivalences and markedly different priorities in the works than the official narrative of his day: "Agnon spells out large the magic of individual and collective dreams spun around the Orient but does not hesitate to flaunt their delusional qualities and the hazards they may entail" (p. 99). Accordingly, in her reading of *Betrothed*, she uncovers a writer whose inventive recasting of the Song expresses far more interest in its efficacy for achieving aesthetic revitalization, indeterminate journeys into artistic interiority, rather than rootedness in Palestinian geography or national renewal.

Hence the Dr. Ginat of "Edo and Enam," the Orientalist (Pardes speculates intriguingly on the likely model for this character, the famous ethnographer and historian Shlomo Dov Goitein) who devotes himself to recovering the "authentic hymns of Enam" seems set on a quixotic quest, for:

Appearing on no known map, Enam is something of an imaginary Eastern oasis, bearing a phonetic similarity to *teyman* (Yemen) and *'elam* (a biblical designation for Persia) as well as to *eynot* ("fountains") and *eynam* ("non-existent"). It serves not only as a site through which to examine the ancient and contemporary culture of exilic, Eastern communities but also as a screen through which to explore the dreamy, allegorical zones of Zion—where national love is renewed within the Oriental, erotic-poetic, pastoral landscapes and music-scapes of the Song. (p. 99)

And in this context, Pardes proves deeply attuned to the music and poetry in Agnon's own transformative language; her close readings are often ingenious. Above all, to borrow from her account of one of Agnon's own creations, she

brings to resplendent life a “wild exegete” who “wanders between several perspectives at once—the fabulous, the mystical, and...the scientific—admiring the ever-changing shifts in color” (p. 115).

Throughout, Pardes proves as gifted and dexterous an interpreter of the biblical text as of Agnon’s works. The terrific epilogue offers brief but meaningful homage to the extraordinary resonance of the Song in Israeli culture well into our own time; aside from its vital role in wedding ceremonies, Yehuda Amichai, Haim Be’er, Arik Einstein, David Grossman, and Idan Raichel are among the many artists whose imaginative renderings fulfill Agnon’s intimations that the text would continue to tantalize with allegorical possibilities, “lingering traces of religious paradigms” (p. 134) forever eluding the containment of Zionist secularism. If stylistically, Pardes’ language here is sometimes more restrained than in her audaciously imaginative psychoanalytic study, *The Biography of Ancient Israel*, this is nonetheless an altogether readable and lucid discussion and, in spite of its relative brevity, her erudition and innovation ensure that *Agnon’s Moonstruck Lovers* will be valuable reading for any dedicated student of modern Hebrew literature and culture. Its impact on Agnon scholarship will surely be significant and lasting.

*Ranen Omer-Sherman*  
*University of Louisville*  
*Louisville, KY 40290*  
*ranen.omersherman@louisville.edu*