

SHIRA

S. Y. AGNON

A NEWLY REVISED TRANSLATION
FROM THE HEBREW BY

Zeva Shapiro

WITH AN ILLUSTRATED
AFTERWORD BY

Robert Alter

AND A NEWLY TRANSLATED CHAPTER
FROM THE AUTHOR'S ARCHIVE

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Afterword by Robert Alter

S*hira* is S. Y. Agnon's culminating effort to articulate through the comprehensive form of the novel his vision of the role of art in human reality. It engaged him – with long interruptions, during which he devoted himself to shorter fiction – for almost a quarter of a century. On his deathbed, in 1970, he gave his daughter instructions to publish the novel with Book Four still incomplete. Posthumously, the text of *Shira* remains unstable. The first Hebrew edition in 1971 ends with the fragmentary ninth chapter of Book Four, which includes Herbst's musings on the professor of medicine who injects himself with a dangerous disease in order to find a cure (a historical figure at the Hebrew University, Shaul Adler), and breaks off with the narrator's declaration that Shira has disappeared and cannot be found. A subsequent edition in 1974 appended the brief episode Agnon had marked in manuscript as "Final Chapter," in which Herbst joins Shira in the leper hospital; this ending was originally intended to conclude Book Three but was set aside when Agnon went on to write a fourth book. In 1978, another substantial episode, like "Final Chapter" incorporated in the present version, was published: corresponding in fictional time to chapters 8–19 of Book Three, it prepares the way

for Herbst's discovery of Shira in the leper hospital and also explores a narrative possibility not raised elsewhere – Herbst's confession of his infidelity to his wife.

Incomplete as it is, and even with some signs of uncertainty in its digressive and repetitive patterns, *Shira* is a remarkable work. The psychosexual realism – most strikingly evident in Herbst's guilt-ridden, violence-prone, sadomasochistic dreams and fantasies – surpasses anything else Agnon did in this vein. What may have prevented him from finishing the book was that beyond any aim of realistic representation of psyche and social milieu, Agnon wanted to imagine in concrete novelistic detail the ultimate relation of art (or “poetry,” the meaning of Shira's name) to truth, or, in regard to genre, to pass through the dense medium of realism to allegory, and that was a consummation that eluded him.

It may be helpful to place *Shira* in Agnon's chronological development as a novelist. His earliest Hebrew fiction (there had been a few Yiddish stories before) was published in the half-dozen years after his arrival in Palestine from Galicia in 1908 at the age of nineteen, and consisted entirely of short stories and novellas. Many of these were in the subtly ventriloquistic mode of a traditional Hebrew teller of tales, and it was this identity that figured in most readers' minds as Agnon rapidly made himself a commanding figure in Hebrew prose. Characteristically, his artfully archaizing novella set in pre-modern Galicia, *And the Crooked Shall Be Straight* (1912), was widely perceived in these years as his emblematic achievement. In 1913 Agnon left Palestine for Germany, ostensibly for a brief stay, but the war and a variety of personal reasons held him there till 1924. It is during the first few years of his German sojourn that he arrives at artistic maturity, rigorously revising his often effusive early stories in a precise, understated, classicizing prose that would remain his hallmark. Shortly after the war, he was working on his first novel, an autobiographical fiction he called *In the Bond of Life*. Though he announced in a letter written in 1920 that it would soon be in print, he must have had difficulties with it because it was still in manuscript in 1924 when it was destroyed in a fire that devastated his apartment in Bad Homburg, and Agnon never attempted to reconstruct the book. His first long integrated work,

The Bridal Canopy (1931; English trans., 1937), is only marginally a novel, because it reverts to the medieval and Renaissance form of the frame-story – the peregrinations of a protagonist and his companion – into which is introduced a variegated abundance of anecdotes, fables, tall tales, and the like.

Meanwhile, Agnon continued to write realistic short fiction far removed from both the eighteenth-century setting and the formal traditionalism of *The Bridal Canopy*, and this involvement in social and psychological realism culminated in his first proper novel, *A Simple Story* (1935, English trans., 1985), a book more restricted in scope than the novels that would follow but, in the rendering of the evolution of a psychosis and its ironically qualified cure, probably the most flawlessly sustained of all his novels. From this point on, though he continued to experiment with different modes of short fiction, from anecdotal and reminiscent to surrealist and symbolic, his commitment to the capaciousness of the novel form was clear. In 1939, writing with uncharacteristic rapidity, he produced *A Guest for the Night* (English trans., 1968), his personal confrontation, on the eve of the Second World War, with the inward dying of European Judaism. In 1945 he brought out an even more ambitiously original novel, *Only Yesterday*, set in the Palestine he had encountered as a very young man, in which he combines historical realism with intricate symbolism and tragic-grotesque humor (some of the most remarkable chapters, initially composed in the early thirties, follow the canine viewpoint of a Jerusalem mongrel named Balak, who proves to be the most philosophically reflective and the most engaging character in the book).

In each of the three novels Agnon published from 1935 to 1945, he had found ways to go strikingly beyond his previous work in the fashioning of new fictional forms and in the range of themes he was able to sound. It was clearly his intention to go beyond himself once again in *Shira*, and he apparently set to work on the new novel not long after the appearance of *Only Yesterday*. Between 1949 and 1952, he published chapters of *Shira* in a literary yearbook issued by the newspaper *Ha'aretz*, material corresponding to most of Book One and Book Two of the novel as we have it. The excitement roused in

Hebrew literary circles was then frustrated as Agnon confined the continuation of *Shira* to the privacy of his drawer, pursuing other projects in print. In 1966, after he received the Nobel Prize, he allowed two more chapters to appear, and, with failing physical powers, he was working on *Shira* in his last years, still hoping to forge it into what it would in any case, even incomplete, prove to be – his great last testament as a writer.

Shira is at once Agnon's fullest invocation of the nineteenth-century European novel and a deliberate modernist demonstration of the collapse of the thematic concerns and formal strategies of the nineteenth-century novel. Adultery as an attempted escape from the flatness and the stifling routine of bourgeois society is, of course, one of the two or three great recurrent themes of the traditional novel. One could not have chosen a more thoroughly bourgeois realm in the Palestine of the 1930s than the milieu of the Hebrew University with its predominantly German-Jewish professorate, where propriety, conformism, industriousness, self-importance, and social status were the governing values. Agnon, who lived on the margins of the Hebrew University, some of his best friends being members of its faculty, knew this world well and rendered it in his last novel with a shrewd satiric eye. *Shira*, however, turns out to be something quite different from a latter-day Hebrew reprise of *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* in an academic setting. Herbst, unlike Flaubert's Emma, does not "discover in adultery all the platitudes of married life" but, on the contrary, finds that a fleeting carnal encounter with an unlikely object of desire opens up vertiginous new perspectives, makes bourgeois hearth and home unlivable for him, impels him in ways he is hardly conscious of to do something radically other with his life.

The background of political violence is one of the keys to the difference between *Shira* and the tradition of the European novel that it recalls. The bourgeois academic world from which Manfred Herbst derives is not a fixed datum of social reality, as would be the case in a nineteenth-century novel, but is seen instead as a fragile choreography of complacent social rituals on the brink of a historical abyss. The novel is set in the late thirties, in the midst of the murderous Arab attacks on the Jewish population of Palestine that began

in 1936. The ideological tension between Jewish militants, like the underground group to which Herbst's daughter Tamara belongs, and the pacifists of the Brit Shalom organization at the Hebrew University, is frequently invoked. On the European horizon that has the most urgent thematic relevance to all that transpires in the Jerusalem setting of the novel, Herbst's German homeland is preparing the machinery for genocide. In a world moving rapidly from episodic terror to systematic mass murder on the most unprecedented scale, mere private experience – the staple of the classic novel – dwindles to insignificance. Adultery can no longer be even the illusory personal adventure it was in nineteenth-century fiction, and the very premise of the linear plot of the novel of adultery is called into question: Herbst's involvement with Shira cannot go anywhere as a developing chain of fictional events; instead, he circles around and around the idea of Shira, or, what amounts to the same thing, around what Shira's disturbing presence has released within him.

Let me state this in terms of the quest for knowledge that is a central issue in the novel. Herbst and his fellow cultivators of the grove of academe, equipped with their index cards and bibliographies and learned journals, sedulously pursue the most esoteric and distant objects of knowledge – the burial customs of ancient Byzantium, the alphabets of long-lost languages. The purported sphere of these objects of knowledge is history, but do these historical investigations, beyond their utility in advancing the careers of the investigators, tell us anything essential about the historical forces that are about to move the German nation to gun down, gas, and incinerate millions of men, women, and children? The European perpetrators of these horrors are, after all, at least in part products of the same academic culture as Herbst and his colleagues. The most troubling question a Jewish writer after 1945 could raise is variously intimated here, particularly in Herbst's nightmares and hallucinations: Could there be a subterranean connection between forces at work, however repressed, within the civilized Jew and the planners and executors of mass murder who are, after all, men like you and me? At the beginning of the novel, Herbst is unable to write that big second book which will earn him his professorship because he has a writer's block.

As the effects of his exposure to Shira sink in, he is unable to write it because it has become pointless, such knowledge as could be realized through it felt to be irrelevant. Instead, Herbst hits on the desperate idea of writing a tragedy, for his experience with the radical ambiguity of eros in his involvement with Shira/Poetry leads him to sense that art, unlike historical inquiry, has the capacity to produce probing, painful self-knowledge, and is able to envisage history not as a sequence of documented events but as a terrible interplay of energies of love and death, health and ghastly sickness. Herbst, with his habits of academic timidity, his hesitant and unfocused character, may not ever be capable of creating such exacting art, but he is ineluctably drawn to the idea of it.

The underlying concern with the nature of art in *Shira* is reflected in its wealth of references – scrupulously avoided elsewhere in Agnon’s fiction – to European writers: Goethe, Nietzsche, Balzac, Rilke, Gottfried Keller, Stefan George, not to speak of the Greek tragedians and their German scholarly expositors whom Herbst reviews in his quixotic attempt to write a tragedy (ostensibly, a historical drama set in the Byzantine period but unconsciously a reflection of his own agonizing erotic dilemma with Shira). From one point of view, this is a novel about the impossibility of tragedy in the modern age, and especially after the advent of Hitler – that is to say, the impossibility of a literary form that assigns meaning to suffering, or represents an experience of transcendence through suffering. In consonance with this concern with tragedy, a good deal of weight is given to Nietzsche’s notion in *The Birth of Tragedy* of the roots of the genre in an experience of violent primal forces contained by artistic form – Herbst, preeminently a “Socratic” man in Nietzsche’s negative characterization of German academic culture, at one point runs across a first edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* in an antiquarian bookshop.

Another manifestation of Agnon’s preoccupation here with the way art illuminates reality is the attention devoted to painting, again, a thoroughly uncharacteristic emphasis in his fiction. Three painters figure significantly in the novel: Rembrandt and Böcklin, who recur as motifs in connection with Shira, and the anonymous artist from the school of Bruegel responsible for the stupendous canvas of the

leper and the townscape (III:15) that constitutes Herbst's great moment of terrifying and alluring revelation. A look at how the three painters interact in the novel may suggest something of what Agnon was trying to say about art, and perhaps also why he found his way to a conclusion of the novel ultimately blocked.

If art, or poetry, is a route to knowledge radically different from the academic enterprise that has been Herbst's world, Agnon sees as its defining characteristic a capacity to fuse antinomies, to break down the logically marked categories – Herbst's boxes full of carefully inscribed research notes – presupposed by scholarly investigation. The Bruegelian painting Herbst discovers at the antiquarian's is a multiple transgression of the borderlines of reason, and that, he realizes, is the power of its truthful vision. The leper's eye-sockets are mostly eaten away by the disease [see Fig. 1], yet they are alive and seek life – a paradox that reenacts the underlying achievement of the painter, “who imbued the inanimate with the breath of life.” The medium of the painting is of course silent, but Herbst, contemplating the warning bell held by the leper, experiences a kind of synesthetic hallucination, hears the terrible clanging sound, and feels the waves of the disease radiating out from the leper's hand. The painting from the school of Bruegel, as I have proposed elsewhere,* is in its formal and thematic deployment a model for the kind of art embodied in *Shira* itself: in the foreground, the horrific and compelling figure of the diseased person [Fig.2], intimating an impending cataclysm; in the background, half out of focus, the oblivious burghers complacently going about their daily pursuits [Fig. 3]. Agnon gives us not only the artwork but also an exemplary audience for it in Herbst. The historian of Byzantium is mesmerized by the painting in a paradoxically double way: “he looked at it, again and again with panic in his eyes and desire in his heart.” The painting at once scares him and translates him to an unwonted plane of experience, because it both speaks eloquently to a universal truth of human experience and gives him back a potent image, of which he is scarcely conscious, of his own life.

* “A Novel of the Post-Tragic World,” in my book *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1977).

Shira

The painting depicted in Book II Chapter 15 “from the school of Bruegel” does not seem to be an actual painting, but Agnon may have been drawing on elements from a number of works by Flemish Renaissance painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525-1569), see figs. 1-3.



Fig. 1: Bruegel the Elder, “The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind” (1568) – Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. (“Herbst picked up the picture and stood it up so he could see it better. The eyes were awesome and sad. Their sockets had, for the most part, been consumed by leprosy, yet they were alive and wished to live.”)

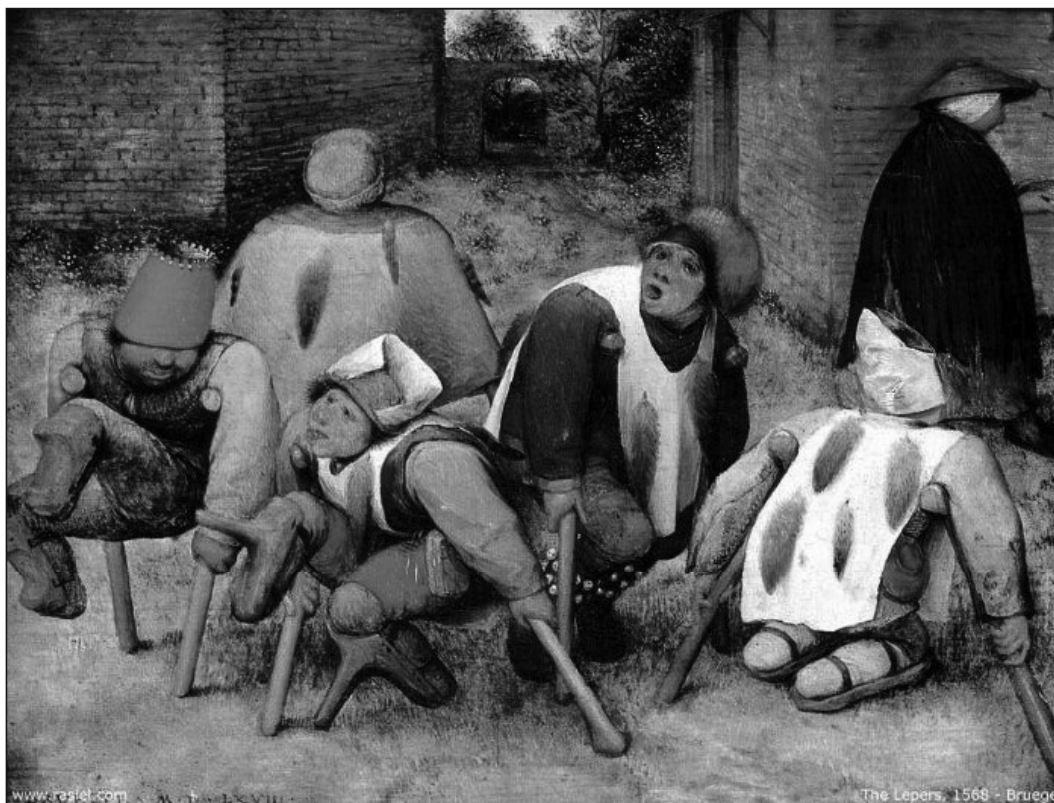


Fig. 2: Bruegel the Elder, “The Lepers” (aka “The Cripples”) (1568) – The Louvre, Paris



Fig. 3: Bruegel the Elder, Detail of "The Fight of Carnival and Lent" (1559) –
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



Fig. 4: Rembrandt, "The Night Watch" (1642) – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Fig. 5: Rembrandt, "The Anatomy Lesson" (1632) – Mauritshuis, The Hague



Fig. 6: Arnold Böcklin, "The Isle of the Dead" (1883) – Nationalgalerie, Berlin



Fig. 7: Arnold Böcklin, "The Plague" (1898) –
Kunstmuseum, Basel

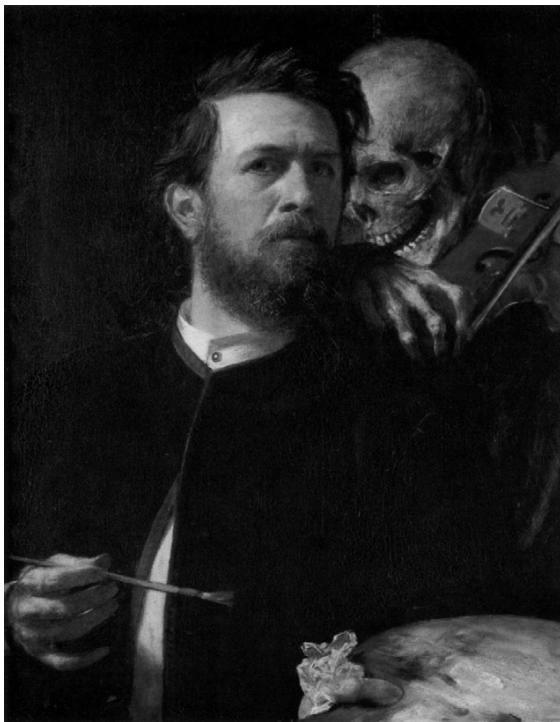


Fig. 8: Arnold Böcklin, "Self-Portrait with Death
as a Fiddler" (1872) – Nationalgalerie, Berlin

Seeking relief from the terrible intensity of the Bruegelian painting, Herbst flips through a stack of Rembrandt reproductions and comes to *The Night Watch* [Fig. 4], on which he dwells. Rembrandt would seem to present a kind of art antithetical to that of the anonymous painter from the school of Bruegel. The narrator tells us that Herbst now experiences a sense of melancholy accompanied by “inner tranquility” (*menuhat hanefesh*, literally, “soul’s rest”), a tranquility usually identified as harmony but which he, the narrator, prefers to associate with the illumination of knowledge. The opposition, however, between Rembrandtian and Bruegelian art rapidly dissolves, like most of the key oppositions in the novel. To begin with, *The Night Watch* immediately makes Herbst think of Shira, who had been looking for a reproduction of the painting, and she is doubly associated with disease – the wasting disease that by this point we suspect she has contracted, and her hapless lover’s disease of the spirit manifested in his obsessive relationship with her. But a few minutes later in narrated time, Herbst suddenly realizes that his memory has played a trick on him, or, in the psychoanalytic terms never far from Agnon’s way of conceiving things from the thirties onward, he has temporarily repressed something. It was not *The Night Watch*, with its beautifully composed sense of confident procession, that Shira wanted, but another Rembrandt painting, *The Anatomy Lesson* [Fig. 5]. The clinical subject of the latter painting might of course have a certain professional appeal to Shira as a nurse, but what is more important is that its central subject is not living men marching but a cadaver, and thus it is linked with the representation of the living-dead leper in the anonymous canvas.

Death as a subject, in turn, connects Rembrandt with Böcklin, the artist responsible for the painting of the death’s-head that Shira keeps in her apartment. Arnold Böcklin, a Swiss painter much in fashion in Central Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century (Stefan George wrote a poem about him), provides one of the teasing keys to *Shira*. Böcklin had a pronounced preference for mythological and allegorical topics, often rendered with a sharp realism of detail, and in pursuing this interest he repeatedly devoted emphatic attention to those figures of classical mythology associated with a

riot of sensuality – Pan, satyrs, centaurs, Triton disporting himself with a Nereid. He also produced two versions of an allegorical painting that is particularly pertinent to the central thematic complex of *Shira*: entitled *Poetry and Painting*, it shows two female figures on either side of a fountain (presumably, the Pierian Spring), Poetry on the left, naked to the waist, leaning on the fountain's edge; Painting on the right, enveloped in drapery, dipping one hand into the water while with the other she holds a palette. Interestingly, Böcklin never did a painting of a skull, if one can trust the testimony of the comprehensive illustrated catalogue of his paintings published in Berne in 1977. He was, however, much preoccupied with death, which he characteristically represented in a histrionic mode that has a strong affinity with Symbolist painting. One scene he painted a few times was *The Isle of the Dead* [Fig. 6], in which the island looms as a spooky vertical mass against a dark background, with a small boat approaching it in the foreground, rowed by a presumably male figure, his back to us, while a female figure in white stands erect in the boat. One of his last paintings, *The Plague* (1898) [Fig. 7], exhibits a more brutally direct relevance to *Shira*: a hideous female figure, with large wings and grotesque tail, yet more woman than monster, swoops down over the streets of a town.

The reproduction that hangs on Shira's wall is probably of *Self-Portrait with Death as Fiddler* (1872) [Fig. 8]. It is possible that Agnon simply forgot the self-portrait and concentrated on the skull when he introduced the painting into his novel, but given his frequently calculating coyness as a writer, it seems more likely that he deliberately suppressed the entire foreground of the canvas. In the foreground, Böcklin, wearing an elegant dark smock, stands with palette in one hand and brush in the other, his trim beard delicately modeled by a source of light from the upper left, his lively lucid eyes intent on the canvas he is painting. Behind him, in the upper right quadrant of the painting, virtually leaning on the painter's back, death as a leering skull with bony hand – rendered in the same precise detail as the figure of the artist – scratches away on his fiddle. That missing artist absorbed in his work who stands in front of the figure of death is, in one respect, what *Shira* is all about.

Death is, I think, a specter of many faces in this somber, troubling novel. It has, to begin with, certain specific historical resonances for the period of the late 1930s in which the action is set. In the two decades since 1914, death had given ample evidence of having been instated as the regnant *Zeitgeist* of the century. Herbst recalls wading up to his knees in blood as a soldier in the great senseless slaughter that was the First World War. The novel begins with mention of a young man murdered by Arabs, and in these days of organized terrorist assaults and random violence against the Jews of Palestine that began in 1936, there is a repeated drumbeat of killings in the background of the main action. On the European horizon, German Jews are desperately trying to escape, many of them sensing that Germany is about to turn into a vast death-trap. But beyond Agnon's ultimately political concern with the historical moment as a time of endemic murder, he is also gripped by the timeless allegory of Böcklin's painting: every artist, in every age, as an ineluctable given of his mortal condition, works with death fiddling at his back, and cannot create any art meaningfully anchored in the human condition unless he makes the potency of death part of it, at once breathing life into the inanimate and incorporating death in his living creation. Agnon was nearing sixty when he began work on the novel and an octogenarian when he made his last concerted effort to finish it, and it is easy enough to imagine that he saw himself in Böcklin's attitude as self-portraitist, the grim fiddler just behind him.

Herbst takes due notice of the Böcklin painting in Shira's apartment, and he is several times bothered by an oddly literal question about it: "Did Böcklin paint from a model or from his imagination? Why do I ask? Herbst wondered about himself (I:29). Why, indeed, should so sophisticated an intellectual trouble himself about whether the painter used a model or not? The question, it should be observed, makes somewhat better sense if one keeps in mind not just the skull but both figures in *Self-Portrait with Death as Fiddler*, for then, since Böcklin demonstrably used himself as the model for the painter, one might begin to speculate about the "source" for the macabre fiddler standing behind the painter, the very hybrid nature

of the composition putting to the test any simple mimetic conception of art. A couple of paragraphs later in the same chapter, a clue, or at least a dangling possibility of connection, is provided for Herbst's question. Again he asks himself whether Böcklin worked from a model or from his imagination, but this time he decides firmly on the latter alternative when he recalls that Böcklin "complained that he never had the chance to draw a woman from life because his wife, who was Italian, was jealous and wouldn't allow him to have a model in his studio." There is an instructive overlap, then, between painting eros and painting thanatos from the imagination rather than from a model. The particular link is important enough for Herbst to pick it up again explicitly in a dream somewhat later in the novel (11:7). In the dream he accompanies his daughter Tamara to Greece, where she means to undertake a study of verse meters (the word *shira* is used here for poetry). The father is glad to have gone with his daughter on the trip for "otherwise she would have seen him walking with Shira, which was not advisable, because Henrietta was in collusion with the wife of a teacher from Beit Hakerem. They agreed to prohibit their husbands from bringing other women to their studios, declaring, 'If they want to draw – let them draw skulls.'" One notes that Böcklin's allegorical pair, *Dichtung und Malerei*, Poetry and Painting, follow in quick sequence in the dream.

Agnon gives one further twist to the Böcklin painting by turning it at one point into a kind of reversed portrait of Dorian Gray: as Shira visibly deteriorates, the painting deteriorates with her and so its artificial deathliness becomes progressively more lifelike: "The picture became so darkened that it would frighten you, as though a real skull were staring at you" (11:2). Agnon never entirely renounced the macabre interests of his early neo-Gothicism, and though here the ghastly correspondence between painter and owner is given a perfectly plausible explanation – as Shira neglects herself, she neglects her possessions and no longer bothers to dust the painting – troubling thoughts are stirred about the status in reality of the artwork. Its origins, or at least the origins of the part of the Böcklin painting mentioned in the novel, are not in the representation of a model but in the artist's

imagination, and yet the unforeseen intercourse between painting and experience produces a spectral affinity between the two, imbuing the artwork with an air of reality the artist himself had not given it.

Let us try to pull these strands together and consider the kind of conclusion to which Agnon wanted them to lead. Shira, hard-bitten, mannish, unsexed, coldly imperious, neither young nor pretty, seems an unlikely candidate either for the focus of an erotic obsession or for the symbolic representation of Poetry. It seems to me, however, that all these unappetizing traits are precisely what makes her the perfect conduit to carry Herbst from the realm of scholarship to the realm of poetry. Agnon's figure for Poetry is no classical maiden in decorous *déshabillé*. Art as he conceives it is a violation of all the conventional expectations of bourgeois rationality. In Freudian terms, the roots of art are in the pre-moral realm of polymorphous perversity. It is hard to reconcile anything in the character of Shira with ordinary notions of the good and the beautiful, and once Herbst has learned something about her bizarre sexual history, the initial ambiguity of identity between female and male that he perceives in her is compounded by others in his fantasies: Shira is both the rapist and the raped, the wielder of terrible weapons and the dismembered female victim, the nurturer of mothers and infants and the asocial disrupter of families, nurse and source of contagion. Sexually, she clearly appeals to Herbst because she is everything that his faded-blonde, maternal, sweetly solicitous wife is not, and in the thematic logic of the novel, it is necessary that he be detached from the complacencies of the haven of domesticity in order to be inducted into the soul-trying realm of poetry. The novel stresses the indissoluble bond between poetry and eros, because in Agnon's view what art does is give the revelatory coherence of form to erotic energies (the affinity with both Nietzsche and Freud is not accidental), and, conversely, the many-faced spirit of eros, both god and monster, is the very motor-force of art. It is instructive that Agnon's major fiction before *Shira* repeatedly focuses on some form of gravely impaired male sexuality (*A Simple Story*, *Only Yesterday*, novellas like *The Hill of Sand* and *Betrothed*); only in this novel is there emotionally affecting consum-

mation – “Flesh such as yours will not soon be forgotten” – however elusive the object of desire subsequently proves to be.

But the most crucial crossing of opposites associated with Shira is the wedding of health and sickness, love and death. At the beginning, the freckle-like protuberances on Shira’s cheeks seem to be merely a token of her mannish unattractiveness; eventually, we realize that they were an early sign of her leprosy, and so the death’s head on her wall becomes an emblem of the fate to which she is consigned, in which Herbst will finally join her. It is reasonable to assume that Agnon, who made a careful study of Freud in the 1930s and probably read him episodically earlier during his sojourn in Germany, followed Freud in positing eros and thanatos as the two universal driving forces of the psyche. A couple of the passages we have glanced at establish an eerie equivalence between the two. If Böcklin, Herbst reasons, was obliged to use only the power of his imagination for the female figures he painted, the same must be true for his painting of the skull. And if Herbst in his dream, constrained like Böcklin by his wife’s jealousy, is denied access to female models, he is invited to substitute bony death for woman’s flesh as the subject of his art. In the end, no model is required for either, because love and death are so deeply seated in every one of us, constituting the matrix of all our human imaginings.

A small point in Agnon’s Hebrew makes the force of his ramified use of painting particularly clear. The standard Hebrew verb “to paint,” *tzayer*, is also the verb Agnon uses for “to imagine.” A chief reason for Herbst’s failure to write his tragedy is that he is too fastidious to imagine, or literally “paint to himself,” the concrete suffering of the leper who figures centrally in its plot. “Herbst was afraid to immerse himself in that sickness and explore it, to picture various aspects of leprosy, such as how lepers relate to each other or how they function in conjugal terms” (11:17). The true artist is the person, like Rembrandt of *The Anatomy Lesson*, like the anonymous painter of the school of Bruegel, and like Böcklin, who looks on death and disease clear-eyed and unflinching, just as we see the face of Böcklin in his self-portrait serenely scrutinizing his canvas.

If the artist's credo put forth by *Shira* is in one respect distinctly modernist, embracing the idea of art as an unflinching "technique of trouble," in R. B. Blackmur's phrase, it also has an oddly medieval feeling. Herbst is a historian of Byzantium versed in the ascetic practices of the early Christians, and the novel draws explicit parallels between the monastic renunciation of worldly life and the withdrawal to the leper hospital that Herbst will choose as his final fulfillment. In some of his earlier fiction, Agnon had set up a simple alternative between art and eros, depicting protagonists who renounce the gratification of desire in the name of the pursuit of art. Here, on the other hand, desire joins hands with art in the magic circle of imminent death, removed from the shallow egotism and the complacent self-deceptions of everyday social existence. This is chiefly what I had in mind earlier when I proposed that in *Shira* Agnon seeks to move through realism to allegory. And this, I suspect, was precisely the problem that bedeviled him for nearly two decades after the initial élan that produced Books One and Two. How was he to take Herbst, a figure with a certain academic pedigree, a family history, individual work habits and domestic tics, and translate him into the symbolic sphere where poetry, desire, and death were one; and what face could Shira, hitherto also a novelistic character with an individual sensibility and a personal history, show in that ultimate locus of thematic convergences, withdrawn from the worldly realm? There is a structural analogy, though I am not proposing any influence, between the ending of *Shira* and the ending of Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma*. Stendhal, too, sought to transport a hero entrapped in the petty machinations of worldly life to a privileged sphere of lofty withdrawal from the world, and though his novel never actually breaks off like Agnon's, most critics have felt that the conclusion of this masterpiece of European fiction is huddled, leaping too suddenly from all the complications of the court of Parma to the contemplativeness of the monastery at the very end. Herbst's planned route to the monastic leprosarium is persuasively traced by Adiel Amzeh, the protagonist of the remarkable story "Forevermore," which Agnon originally wrote to include in *Shira* and then decided to publish separately. In the fuller dimensions of the novel, he was unable to find a solid fictional bridge on

which Manfred Herbst could cross over from his home and wife and children and academic tasks to that ghastly consecrated realm where a disease-ridden woman whose name means poetry could offer him more than the world ever could. The result was a plot in which after a certain point the central character can only turn and turn again in the circuits of his one obsession, circling back on the apartment where Shira is no longer to be found, revolving in his mind the idea of the tragedy he would write and the memory of the flesh that cannot be forgotten, which are but obverse sides of the same lost coin.

There are certain works of literature that are finally stymied by the bold effort of the writer to pursue a personal vision beyond the limits of precedent and genre. Stendhal's *Charterhouse* is a memorable case in point; another, still closer to *Shira* in its actual incompleteness, is Kafka's *The Castle*. Confronted with this order of originality, most readers, I think, will be content with the splendid torso, however much they may regret the absence of the fully sculpted figure. In *Shira* the hero's final way to the place of poetry and truth, where death hones desire, is indicated rather than fictionally imagined. But Herbst's descent into an underworld of eros and art, enacted against the background of Jerusalem life in the gathering shadows of a historical cataclysm of inconceivable proportions, is so brilliantly rendered that *Shira*, even without an ending, deserves a place among the major modern novels.

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