



Letter from Jerusalem

Browsing in the last decent bookshop in West Jerusalem, I think often of S.Y. Agnon and his ruined libraries. The first was destroyed in a fire that raged through his family's Homburg apartment one June night in 1924, swallowing all four thousand volumes of the future Nobel Prize winner's valuable collection and reducing to ash the novel that he had laboured over for some seven years. The second library was ransacked during the 1929 Arab riots in Jerusalem. This time Agnon managed to rescue his works-in-progress as well as several precious old manuscripts, though many of his beloved books were destroyed, and the so-called Archive of the History of the Land of Israel, entrusted to him by a local rabbi, was damaged badly. The day after, Agnon sent a gasped telegram to his patron and friend, the publisher Zalman Schocken: 'Life and Manuscripts saved.'

And then there were Agnon's fictional libraries, which spill from *Shira*, the novel that absorbed me on and off for nearly half a year, and which I could neither finish nor stop reading. As it happens, Agnon himself could neither finish nor stop *Shira* – writing it, that is. The book's composition haunted him for decades, and when he died in 1970, he was still wrestling with this darkly tangled tale of death and art, scholarship and desire, contamination and books. Set in late 1930s Jerusalem, the novel is a spooky, associative hodgepodge of, among many things, weirdly graphic ruminations on 'leprosy, whose very name arouses metaphysical terror' and extended, loving descriptions of the book collections of the city's various German-Jewish émigré professors. Many of these men escaped Europe by the skin of their teeth, finding a haven in Palestine for themselves and – what else? – their books.

Agnon's bibliomaniacal Jerusalem is far from the one where I live now, as his intricate, *tel*-like Hebrew is light years away from the language I hear in the post office and read in today's tabloids. The newer Hebrew is, by comparison, thin and violent – quick to explode into the racial slur, the barked insult, the defensive shriek, as though the language itself has been contaminated by current events, the way languages inevitably are. While it may sound perverse to turn in frustration to an archaic figure like Agnon, when I finally finished reading *Shira* in English translation, I set out to look for the book in the original. Was I somehow hoping that Agnon might help me redeem Hebrew, at least for myself?

If so, my hope turned out to be highfalutin and irrelevant, since this book – perhaps the ultimate Jerusalem novel, by the modern city's most acclaimed writer – was unavailable, used or new, in the first eight shops I tried. '*Shira* by Agnon?' the dull-eyed twentysomething clerk at Steimatzky's, the most dismal and pervasive of all the chain stores, repeated the Hebrew words after me. 'Did you try the poetry section?' (*Shira* means poetry in Hebrew.) 'What is the book called?' She had never heard of *Shira*, it was clear, so I explained, in Who's-on-first fashion, that *Shira* here was the name of a book and not a literary genre. She just shrugged and went on gift wrapping the glossy Hebrew guide to THE TOTAL MAKE-OVER for the teenager slumping and chomping her bubble gum before me.

I proceeded to the town's last good bookshop. Nestled in an alleyway on the outskirts of Rehavia, the store serves a purpose at once commendable and sad: to provide a resting place for the libraries of the city's well-read dead. As this generation of multilingual natural-born book lovers dwindles, the shop scoops up the collections and sells them off, piece by piece, thus dispersing the last remnant of their late owners' tastes and sensibilities. ('The phenomenon of collecting,' wrote Walter Benjamin, a fellow bibliophile and close friend to some of these very Jerusalemite readers, 'loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner.') But this was not a good day for Agnon: *Shira* was not to be had there either.

I did eventually unearth a copy, in an unattractive reprint edition, and in a store where all the other customers were ultra-Orthodox and, to tell from their accents and halting spoken Hebrew, American. But perhaps it stands to reason. As I smuggled *Shira* through a downtown Agnon would hardly recognize, I reminded myself that we are a people of the book, not the bookstores. ●

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