

ALTMANN'S MOSES MENDELSSOHN *

UPON CONCLUSION OF HIS BOOK *Aspects of Biography* (1929), André Maurois suggests that biography will always be a difficult form of art; for "we demand of it the scrupulosity of science and the enchantments of art, the perceptible truth of the novel and the learned falsehoods of history."

To alleviate some of the difficulties referred to by Maurois, Professor Altmann, author of the new biography of Moses Mendelssohn, intentionally presents us with "a biographical study" rather than a biography. By so doing, he is apparently suggesting his own preference in the approach to the story of a life, namely, the scientific, scholarly, and learned approach.

Yet even after having set these limitations, the task chosen by Altmann is a most difficult one. Nowadays one cannot write a biography of Mendelssohn after the fashion of Eichel's all-glorifying biography which was published two years after Mendelssohn's death. Neither can one undertake to duplicate, in modern style, Kayserling's biography which was published in 1862 and revised in 1888. Ever since the publication of these two extreme examples of exposition of Mendelssohn's life, the study of Mendelssohn and his writings, as well as the study of the contemporary German, Jewish, and Hebrew authors, and especially of the Jewish and Hebrew Enlightenment, have advanced tremendously. No biographical study of "the Jewish Socrates" could even be attempted without firsthand knowledge and expertise in the vast amount of these published scholarly materials.

Furthermore, firsthand knowledge is required of the modern biographer also in the enormous literature of the Jewish people: the classical rabbinic literature and medieval Jewish philosophy, which had shaped and molded this unique figure of a traditional Jew before he stepped out of his Jewish milieu to become one of the most prominent figures in the German *Aufklärung*. Altmann's expertise encompasses this literature; indeed, he possesses a firsthand knowledge of the eighteenth century German, Jewish, and Hebrew Enlightenment as well.

The growing interest in Jewish studies in the last decade has further enhanced the self-searching into the modern phenomena in Judaism

* *Moses Mendelssohn, a Biographical Study*. By Alexander Altmann. University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1973. Pp. 900.

whose roots could be traced to the early Enlightenment in Germany. While this interest might in itself be a contributing factor toward rekindling the desire to study Mendelssohn and his writings, a scholarly biographer must be mindful of the popular attempt to make his own study too relevant and timely. Apparently Altmann had this in mind when he limited the scope of his book: "The present study seeks to present Moses Mendelssohn in strictly biographical terms. It does not attempt to assess his significance from the hindsight of historical perspective or to trace his image in subsequent generations, which have either idolized him as the most perfect embodiment of the modern Jew or abused him as the false prophet of a de-Hebraized, denationalized, assimilated Judaism. It is the *life* of Moses Mendelssohn, and nothing else, that I have tried to describe, and to this end my sole endeavor was to observe this life from within the period in which it was set" (preface, p. xiii).

It is indeed such a work that should enable one to free himself from the shackles of past judgments of Mendelssohn—and for that matter, of his period—which have not always been based on sound scholarly and objective grounds. Yet our author does not impose upon the reader any particular value judgment as to the role played by Mendelssohn in Jewish history, Jewish letters, and Jewish thought. His role and his contributions are presented factually.

Altmann follows a chronological order in his narrative. He traces Mendelssohn's life from his childhood in Dessau and through his early years in Berlin, describing his philosophical and literary progress and achievements. There seem to be two major turning points in Mendelssohn's life, centering in the two public controversies that changed his life: one was the Lavater affair in 1769-70, and the other was the Jacobi conflict in 1784-85. Two aspects of the Mendelssohn phenomenon are symbolically highlighted in these two disputes. In the first one, Mendelssohn came out to defend, and to profess his deep conviction of, his Jewishness and the truth of Judaism. The other dispute revealed the German aspect of his activities, when he defended the memory of his friend Lessing. These two episodes were, as is well known, crucial in his life, and they are elaborated upon by Altmann. He deals with them as he does with the other issues in the book, by first sketching the philosophical and social backgrounds. He then analyzes the issues and highlights the significance of their results to both Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment.

Altmann's exposition of Mendelssohn's life could be generally classified under two headings: (a) Mendelssohn's works as a philosopher; (b) his works in Hebraica and Judaica.

Altmann seems to uphold the view expressed by some earlier

writers (see this reviewer's *Moses Mendelssohn: Bonds of Tradition* [in Hebrew], Tel Aviv, 1972, p. 9), that Mendelssohn was endeavoring to bridge the two worlds in which he lived: the German world of the Enlightenment, and the Jewish world. Indeed, this view turns out to be the leitmotif throughout the book. Mendelssohn is depicted as conducting a continuous struggle with forces both within the traditional Jewish spheres and outside the Jewish community. On the one hand, Mendelssohn is preaching the modern aspects of Judaism; on the other, he is defending Judaism as an enlightened religion.

A brief review cannot do full justice to the book and to its author. It is for this reason that I propose to examine in greater detail only one of the subchapters in the book. It is the assumption of this reviewer that the methodology employed by Altmann, his scholarship, and his treatment of the subject of that subchapter, shed light on Altmann's work as a whole.

The subchapter under consideration has to do with Mendelssohn's publication of the first Hebrew periodical, *Qohelet Musar*, in 1758. Although this enterprise was in no way one of Mendelssohn's great achievements, its importance to the understanding of Mendelssohn and his time is stressed by the author. It is explained in the light of Mendelssohn's other literary activities (his writings on Biblical poetry), and of the future development of the Hebrew periodical literature, namely, the publication of the first regular periodical, *ha-Me'assef*. Differences in background and style are pointed out by the author, thus recreating the historical, social, cultural, and literary background and framework for Mendelssohn's literary endeavor. Altmann explains Mendelssohn's motives, significantly identical with the motives of his other endeavors: "to counteract the disruptive influence of the Berlin Enlightenment upon young Jews" (p. 84). The second reason given by Altmann, and clearly stated by Mendelssohn himself, is "a desire to make them share their own enthusiasm for the beauty of the Hebrew language, especially of Biblical Hebrew. They [the editors of the periodical] felt that a revival of the classical Hebrew style was bound to create a sense of aesthetic pleasure, and thereby of national pride as well" (p. 84). Altmann follows Euchel in stressing these motives (see Euchel's *Toldot*, pp. 12-13).

Altmann, in a way, wrote a small monograph on this journal, and this was clearly his method in the other aspects of Mendelssohn's life and work throughout the book. He took it upon himself to solve certain bibliographical riddles connected with the subject matter, such as the identity of the other editor of the journal (unresolved; more than one page is devoted to this question), the dating of its publication (1758), and the causes of its discontinuance (see p. 91).

Altmann has checked the primary and secondary sources, and has thoroughly familiarized himself with the up-to-date literature on the subject, as is evident from his notes.

Altmann analyzes the contents of every chapter (or section) of the journal, contributing his own insights as to the background of the published material, and its relation to Enlightenment ideology and philosophy, with which Altmann is likewise thoroughly familiar (e.g. physico-theology, chain of being). He arrives at the significant conclusion that "a single voice speaks throughout, and it is the voice of Mendelssohn" (p. 87).

Mendelssohn's philosophical method, as analyzed by Altmann, is an attempt to harmonize philosophical and Talmudic concepts (p. 89). Leibnizian/Wolffian concepts are seen as blended with rabbinic piety (p. 88).

The question why Mendelssohn has never acknowledged publicly his association with the journal has engaged many scholars and biographers (Euchel, in his biography; Klausner, in his *History of Modern Hebrew Literature*). Altmann, too, attempts to solve this perplexing riddle: "The reason was not so much shyness as an understandable concern for his reputation. Having made a name for himself in philosophy and literary criticism, he saw no need to publicize his authorship of essays that were, in a way, below standard, according to his own judgment" (p. 84). "As in the case of his connection with Mûchler's periodicals, he preferred anonymity in this instance too" (*ibid.*).

Underlying Altmann's exposition in this chapter, as in the others, is an overall attempt to grasp the phenomenology of Moses Mendelssohn and to comprehend his unique role in, and the essence of his contribution to, Jewish-German and Hebrew Enlightenment. Altmann summarizes his conclusion as follows: "It was characteristic of his loyalty to Jewish tradition that he advocated a return to Biblical Hebrew precisely at the moment at which he had become a full-fledged member of the circle of German literati" (pp. 87-88). This insight into Mendelssohn is indeed as close as Altmann would come to a value judgment which is based on facts. Significantly, this insight preempts many discussions in the subsequent generations as to Mendelssohn's attitude toward Jewish tradition.

Similar treatment can be found in Altmann's discussion of Mendelssohn's works on the immortality of the soul, of his translation and exegesis of the Pentateuch, and of his philosophy of Judaism as expounded in *Jerusalem*, in his letters to Lavater, and in his other writings. Mendelssohn's stand regarding the reform of Jewish education, the problem of excommunication and the authority of the rabbis,

and the early burial of the dead is also discussed in depth and in great detail.

Altmann's view is panoramic, yet he has a way of incorporating within this scope an analysis of the minute details of his subject matter. He does it mainly in the very elaborate apparatus of learned footnotes which indicate the vast amount of research and painstaking scrutiny that was involved in the composition of the book. Nothing escapes his curiosity; nothing escapes his analysis. It is as if Altmann's motto is: "I am concerned with the life of Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment, and nothing which has to do with either is alien to me" (based on the classical Latin adage: "I am a man, and I consider nothing human as alien to me").

One is driven to the conclusion that this work is a biography not only of one man but indeed of an entire period. Altmann portrays the personalities of Lessing, Jacobi, Nicolai, and other literati of the German *Aufklärung*, as well as those of Mendelssohn's associates and followers, such as Marcus Herz, David Friedländer, and Herz Homberg. The Hebrew Enlighteners, too, are discussed, and their works relevant to Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment are mentioned and at times also analyzed. Wessely, Satanow, Maimon, Brill, and Euchel are referred to again and again in his portrayal of the period. Altmann stresses especially the impact that Mendelssohn had on these writers.

Georg Misch made a very important observation: "Great works of biographical art . . . are always made possible only by a living relationship between the biographer and his subject" (*A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, I (London 1950), p. 63). Altmann establishes a living relationship with Mendelssohn in the twentieth century through a complete reconstruction of his life and his time, and through a loving bond between the biographer and his subject.

This monumental work is now required reading for everyone interested in Jewish intellectual history and in the spiritual, cultural, and religious development of the Jewish people in modern times.