



Agnon's story: a psychoanalytic biography of S. Y. Agnon

by Avner Falk, Leiden, Brill-Rodopi, 2018, 765 pp., 162 Euro, ISBN 9789004367777

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never going to be sympathetic to the government of Philippe Pétain, but he pours scorn on virtually everything he reads in the state-censored newspapers and on Radio-Vichy, the official state radio station. By contrast, he is an avid listener of the French Service of the BBC, comparing these two competing voices throughout the diary. In common with many people under Occupation, Werth had relatively little to do; unlike others, he was forced into hiding in the village of Saint-Amour for his own safety, to avoid the dual anti-Semitic legislation of the Vichy regime and the Nazis which applied in his home city of Paris.

Devoid of his typical pre-war routine, Werth immersed himself in the recording of contemporaneous thoughts, partly based on village gossip, partly on what he heard or read through Vichy missives in propaganda, and partly through titbits brought to him by his wife who remained in Paris. It is here that Werth's status as a remarkable individual is cemented: unlike the average French person living under Vichy rule, Werth was incredibly well-informed.

As historians, we must interrogate our sources carefully. Werth's diary cannot be taken as wholly reliable, in much the same way as any account of the Occupation. But it gives us a thoroughly detailed and fluent snapshot into the lived experiences of someone who—had he not possessed the material means to live safely beyond Paris—might otherwise have been the victim of the Vichy regime's imposition of anti-Semitic measures and facilitation of the Final Solution. On both the very colourful local level and on a grander national level, Werth's diary—and this timely translation by David Ball—are vital reading for anyone interested in this dark period of French history.

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Agnon's story: a psychoanalytic biography of S. Y. Agnon, by Avner Falk,
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How can one write a brief review of a seven-hundred-plus tome, one so densely packed with information about the life, and possibly psychological state of Shmu'el Yosef Agnon, Hebrew literature's unrivalled author? The very fact of this study's publication is further proof that the "Agnon industry" is still thriving and examining this author from a plethora of perspectives, a mark of the multifaceted artist whose talent continues to be a source of fascination and analysis by his readers and reassures his status as a classic for generations to come. For Agnon's accomplishments are a contemporary illustration of what we find in the sources, attributed to Ben Bag Bag (or, elsewhere, Hillel the Elder): "Turn it [the Torah] and turn it again, for everything is in it." (Pirke Avot 5:26)

Unlike most studies of Agnon, this is a psychobiography, or a "psycho-analytic biography," as the title has it, striving to probe the inner, and sometimes darker layers of

Agnon the man, and much less so his writings—despite the declaration that “This psychoanalytic biography sets out to understand how and why Agnon came to write his stories and what they meant in connection to his innermost feelings.” (p. 1) For unlike other studies that are psychoanalytical studies of literary works, such as Mordechai Geldman’s about E. A. Poe, U. Z. Greenberg and Shakespeare, Falk’s ventures into the author’s mind. In English, and perhaps even for other Hebrew studies, this is a unique study of Agnon, Israel’s 1966 Nobel Prize laureate in literature. Its value, if for nothing else, is that it contains the most thorough and updated bibliography of some 150 pages for perusal and scholarship. Moreover, it presents an impressively detailed biography of Agnon, meticulously researched and assembled from a host of sources. It brings to light the significance of psychoanalysis in the lives of the author and Esther, his wife, that is a persuasive argument to bring it to bear on the author’s life as well as creative works.

What this study could have used, however, is the heavy hand of its editors in cutting away the numerous repetitions, inconsistencies, digressions to extraneous issues or personalities and many unsupported claims that are the author’s conjectures. The number of issues to be contested exceeds the scope of this brief review. For example, the author frequently resorts to repeating the disparity between Agnon’s claim to his date of birth (in 1888) and that which has now been documented to be 1887. Moreover, given that artists tend to project or possess a self-centred ego, the repetitive claims of Agnon being “narcissistic” do not add much to the study. This reader—admittedly not an expert in psychology—is also left unpersuaded of the seemingly reductionist claims as to the intimate bond struck between his mother, his wife, other women and the land of Israel. It is as if Freudian principles are taken for granted to be applied as a foregone conclusion at any juncture. One is left wondering as to the intended audience of such a volume, whether in the fields of literature or psychology. The book draws on many sources of Agnon’s biography, most of them from Hebrew, making it easily accessible to readers of English. And while the study directs itself to Agnon’s (and others’) psyche, it would have been most constructive to have also attended to the psychological underpinnings of Agnon’s works and his creativity, a subject that continues to amaze readers, students and scholars alike.

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Generation, gender and identity in German-Jewish literature after 1989, by Daphne Maria Seemann, Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2020, 278 pp., €39.80, ISBN 9783826069552

This new book engages with literary representations of post-Holocaust trauma in the works of German-speaking Jewish authors. The generation at the centre of the monograph is occupied with the family as a multigenerational construct of