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Harold Fisch: S. Y. Agnon, Modern Literature Monographs by Harold Fisch

Review by: William Braun

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Harold Fisch: S. Y. Agnon, Modern Literature Monographs*  
(New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975).

*Reviewed by William Braun*

Introductory essays on major writers demand exceptional capabilities on the part of their authors: sympathy for the artist, a thorough knowledge both of the work and its secondary literature, an enthusiasm easily communicated to the reader, and finally a talent for organization which can compress a life-time of artistic achievement into a limited number of pages without sacrificing its authentic essence and flavor.

Professor Fisch acquits himself well of this task in his introduction to S. Y. Agnon. Faced with the well-known difficulty regarding the chronological order in which the works were written and often re-written, Professor Fisch avoids the chronological approach altogether and instead selects certain themes and stylistic modes around which he can organize his discussion. By elaborating on common qualities as he retells the plots of Agnon's novels and short stories, he uncovers the threads which unify the work.

All of Agnon's work is *figural* in Erich Auerbach's sense. It contains, in different degrees and constellations, fully realized characters and situations, but they, at the same time, point beyond themselves, have further meaning, and are carriers of a more mysterious and more inclusive truth. Professor Fisch shows convincingly that this truth in each case is the existence, the history, the purpose and the possible redemption of the Jewish people.

The distinction between foreground and background is traced in the theme of the *Aguna*, the abandoned wife, for here the separation of the lovers points at the same time towards the separation of the people of Israel and the land of Israel from its Creator. The childhood oath, another frequent Agnon theme, a promise made by children or their parents, a lasting bond not easily broken, refers as well to the bond between the *shekhinah* and Israel. The lost key to the ancient *Bet Hamidrash* in Agnon's Shebush, his native Buczacz,

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found later in Jerusalem, is also a symbol for the transfer of old values to a modern home. Agnon's digressiveness, which tends to delay his stories and make them meander and lose their way, are parts of the foreground, while in the background, the all-knowing author assures us that the pattern of destiny will unfold and that there is a providential force at work. The dreaming consciousness, the uncontrolled depth and range of associations, the patterns that seem to grow in circles, which are so characteristic of some stories, are all guided by the author who directs the thrust toward resolution.

At times, it may seem that the background overwhelms the foreground, as in *Sefer HaMa'asim*, (Book of Fables), a work too diffi-

cult to understand without an interpretation which takes the mythic Jewish background into consideration. At other times, as in *Sippur Pashut*, (*A Simple Tale*), the clarity of the foreground seems to prevail. In each case, however, Professor Fisch points out the tension between foreground and background, between reality and the myth of Jewish history with its endless cycles of exiles and returns, catastrophes and redemptions.

Professor Fisch's introduction stimulates the reader to return to the originals to seek out for himself the workings of the dialectic, and to experience that inner growth, as he plots the future from the past, that comes from reading Agnon. This invitation should neither be postponed nor denied.

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*Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music*, by MACY NULMAN (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).

*Reviewed by* Eric Offenbacher

This encyclopedia represents a praiseworthy attempt to include in one "concise" volume (276 pages) about 500 alphabetical listings of what may be gathered under the collective—and quite ambiguous—term "Jewish music." The book reveals an immense amount of scholarship that has gone into its preparation, as evidenced by the valuable bibliographical source material after almost every entry. Cantor Nulman is to be commended for offering an inquiring public—both

laity and professionals—a quick reference work of merit covering multi-faceted terms encountered in the synagogue service (cantillations), descriptions of Biblical instruments, cantorial compositions, as well as 150 biographical sketches of *hazzanim*, of various Jewish composers, musicologists, etc.

The compilation must be judged indiscriminate, however, and poorly edited. The author's introductory statement explains in part, why. He states: "I was faced with the problem of selection and deletion of items, titles and names." Any such