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Review

Ancestral Tales: Reading the Buczacz Stories of S. Y. Agnon, by Alan Mintz

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Alan Mintz's Ancestral Tales provides the fullest critical account of Agnon's A City in Its Fullness, Agnon's posthumous volume of stories about his Galician hometown from its beginnings until the eighteenth century. It is likely to remain the definitive account. Many of the readings are innovative, and all are informed by a rich sense of the cultural and historical backgrounds on which Agnon drew. Although some of the claims made for the artistic achievement of the Agnon volume may be overstated, this last book by Alan Mintz remains an important achievement.

A*ncestral Tales* is Alan Mintz's most ambitious book, at almost 200,000 words his longest, and, many would argue, his best. It is impressive in several ways that I shall indicate, although, for reasons that will become apparent later, my own choice for his best book would be the fine study of Hebrew poetry in America, *Sanctuary in the Wilderness*. Contemplating the splendid mastery of Hebrew scholarship and of the historical contexts of modern Hebrew literature exhibited in *Ancestral Tales*, I am led to think about how I personally witnessed the long trajectory that culminated in this book.

Alan and I first met, quite by chance, on the Columbia campus, where he was in his senior year, majoring in English, and where I was in my first year teaching in the English department, having done my undergraduate degree there five years earlier.

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He was eager to talk with me because he was aware that, while working in English literature, I had begun to publish articles on modern Hebrew literature (much to the disapproval, I strongly suspect, of my senior colleagues in English). We spoke for a few minutes and then, for whatever reasons, had no further contact until several years later, at which point I had happily moved from Columbia to Berkeley for an appointment in Hebrew and comparative literature where I was teaching Agnon and Amichai as well as Fielding, Dickens, Nabokov, Balzac, Flaubert, and others. Alan then had just finished his doctorate in English at Columbia, but he was already more deeply drawn to Hebrew, and, when we met at a conference, he asked me what he might do to establish his professional credentials as a scholar of Hebrew literature. My answer was the obvious one, which no doubt had occurred to him: he should begin to publish critical articles on Hebrew writers in respected journals. That, after all, was precisely how I had ended up getting my position in Hebrew at Berkeley. Alan proceeded to follow this course of action quite diligently, and before long he clearly established his standing as a scholar in the field. His last book is in all respects the work of a writer fully in control of the discipline.

Ancestral Tales will surely remain the indispensable point of critical reference for the understanding of Agnon's *A City in Its Fullness*, the large volume of stories assembled by his daughter, Emuna Yaron, not long after her father's death, some of them published in his later years and others that had been left in manuscript. Alan has scrupulously researched the actual history of the Jewish community of Buczacz, Agnon's hometown, from its origins to its total destruction by the Nazis. His discussion of the book abounds in nice discriminations about the economic structure of the community, its class divisions, and its Torah-based culture, as well as its shifting connections with its Polish overlords and then, when Galicia was incorporated into the Hapsburg Empire in the later eighteenth century, with the Austro-Hungarian authorities, who in many ways fundamentally changed the political landscape of the province. Minutely informed as Alan is about the history of the town and the region, he is alert to the ways in which Agnon chose to modify or completely alter history, and, in some cases, as with the founding of the Jewish community in this place, to substitute myth for history.

The informing argument of *Ancestral Tales* is that Agnon's imaginative reconstruction of the history of his hometown has larger implications because it serves

as a particular representation of the broader Jewish historical experience in Eastern Europe. The overarching project of *A City in Its Fullness*, Alan proposes in his first chapter, “can be taken as an effort to re-spatialize Diaspora Judaism by making a single, concrete place come to life.” This view is summarized and expanded in the concluding paragraph of the book:

East European Jewry, the great cradle of the modern Jewish people, is almost unknowable in its vast spread over many lands and countries. Agnon’s great coup is to choose one place, no matter how middling its importance, and drill down into its bedrock. This is Agnon’s modernity rather than his nostalgia. He knows that it is only through the radical particularity of one community do we gain the chance to fathom the soul of a people.¹

I would guess that, in associating Agnon’s Buczacz project with modernity, Alan has in mind grandly resonant modernist re-creations of particular places such as Joyce’s Dublin, Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, Bely’s Petersburg, and Döblin’s Berlin. Because Alan is conscious of the fact that Agnon is a writer immersed in the major currents of twentieth-century European literature who produced modernist masterpieces in *Only Yesterday* and *Shira*, he is committed to contending—repeatedly in this study—that *A City in Its Fullness*, despite its vehicle of traditional storytelling, is also a modernist work. Yet the evidence offered for this claim of modernism is scant, and that, in turn, relates to a larger problem about the critical evaluation proposed here of Agnon’s volume of stories. Thus, Alan sees the stories as “modern literary artifacts, unthinkable without Kleist and Kafka and Agnon’s own prewar writings and fully exploiting the toolkit of modernist narrative techniques.”² Although *Ancestral Tales* provides many subtle and illuminating analyses of the stories discussed, the contention that they constitute modernist narrative is not concretely demonstrated, and it is a considerable stretch to say that these often chatty, digressive, and occasionally disjointed stories fully exploit the toolkit of modernist narrative.

Perhaps the strongest element of *Ancestral Tales* is its shrewd sense that Agnon is simultaneously writing a kind of history and unabashedly making up history, not

as fabrication but as a way of probing the underlying dynamic of historical experience, sometimes hewing to the facts and sometimes reinventing them: “He exploits the imaginative freedom accorded him as a storyteller to conjure up or reveal or bring into being developments that, if the right opportunities had presented themselves, could have taken place [...] Agnon performs imaginative experiments and interventions while remaining true to the thick texture of the historical record.”³

As an acute observer, moreover, Alan clearly sees that *A City in Its Fullness* is by no means a nostalgic or idealized reconstruction of the Jewish past. There are, to be sure, some stories, especially in the early section of the volume, that are more or less hagiographic (a term avoided in this study) in their celebration of prodigies of devotion to Torah and of piety. But Agnon soon introduces fissures, some of them altogether egregious, into the ostensible whole fabric of the traditional world about which he writes. The saintly norms of traditional life are continually evoked, but, as Alan aptly notes, “The moment of turning from the normative to the deviant is the quintessential narrative act that is repeated endlessly in this work.”⁴ Or, as this perception is formulated elsewhere, “The fiction represents the constraints on these norms and the departures from them, but the norms themselves always remain palpably in the ground beneath the fiction.” The discussion of many of the stories keenly follows the ways in which they show Jewish cupidity, the sometimes savage violence of Jew against Jew, and the manifold workings of corruption within the frame of supposedly pious life.

A correlative of this sense of Agnon’s binocular vision of the Jewish past is the proposal put forth that *A City in Its Fullness* is a bold innovation in regard to Agnon’s previous narrative practice because it deploys, often simultaneously and sometimes alternately, two different kinds of narrators: one who “believes what would have been believed by the learned elite of that time and place”—which is to say, a narrator who is part and parcel of the world of piety he depicts—and the other, at least implicitly, a modern narrator addressing twentieth-century readers who do not necessarily share the values of the Buczacz of yore and whose stance is therefore in a certain sense ironic.⁵ As with the claim about the modernism of the stories, this second narrator is more invoked than analytically demonstrated.

I should add that this presentation of Agnon’s literary return to Buczacz is enacted with considerable stylistic flair and admirable lucidity. Academic jargon

is scrupulously avoided. The most apt terms for the narrative material reviewed are constantly deployed. Indeed, one of the virtues of this book is its admirable readability.

Ancestral Tales is a real critical achievement, but it exhibits one feature that is a slight irritant and another that offers grounds for debate. The irritant is merely a problem of exposition and was probably unavoidable. The critic could scarcely assume that his American readers would have any familiarity with the stories, and even readers who know them in Hebrew could not reasonably be expected to retain many of the details (the original Hebrew publication was in 1973). Consequently, Alan is obliged to devote a considerable amount of space to retelling the stories as he proceeds to interpret them. For some of the longer and more complicated stories, I would estimate that at least two-thirds of the discussion is taken up with plot summary. I suppose there was no way around this, but it does mean that a rather large portion of a long work of literary criticism is focused on simply recounting what happens in the stories.

The second issue is more substantive. From beginning to end, Alan argues that *A City in Its Fullness* is one of Agnon's most arresting achievements, radically innovative in its narrative strategies and exhibiting the highest order of imaginative originality. Terms such as "imposing," "monumental," "triumphant," "great," and "stroke of genius" are insistently applied to these tales. There are certainly passages of acute literary analysis in the course of this work, and readers of the Agnon stories are likely to come away with a sense that there are more complexities and subtleties in many of the stories than one might initially have imagined. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the claim for the greatness of the Agnon volume is overstated. For all the intelligence of the readings put forth here, they will not persuade many readers that this assemblage of uneven stories represents the same level of literary mastery as Agnon's brilliant modernist *Only Yesterday* or the Flaubertian perfection of *A Simple Story* or such beautifully wrought novellas as *The Hill of Sand*, *In the Prime of Her Life*, *Betrothed*, and *Edo and Enam*. Alan does briefly concede that not all the stories in *A City in Its Fullness* are equally good, but his general inclination is to seek some implicit justification for any lack of formal coherence in a story. Thus, in concluding his discussion of the long tale "R. Moshe Aharon and the Mead Merchant," he grants that Moshe Aharon's story is interrupted by an extended

narrative about a guilt-ridden Polish nobleman journeying in search of absolution for his crime and that “the ostensible connection between the two remains slight and unpersuasive, located somewhere between the vagaries of divine providence and the coincidences of melodrama.” Yet, even having formulated what looks like an emphatically negative judgment about the structure of the story, he feels obliged to add, “Again, Agnon as implied author urges us to discover a deeper nexus, one that lies beyond the ken of his narrator.”⁶ This strikes me as a rather peculiar notion: the narrator, admittedly, has lost control of his story, but somehow we are invited to discover a hidden unity that he has failed to provide, and the invocation of narratological terms—the narrator vis-à-vis the implied author—does not really rescue the situation. This is a critical move that is made repeatedly in *Ancestral Tales*. In considering the story “Yekele,” for example, Alan concedes that a lengthy catalogue of all the voluntary associations of Buczacz “sticks out like a sore thumb to impede the forward movement of the story,” but then he goes on to say, “And that seems to be exactly the effect the narrator seeks to achieve, consciously or not.”⁷ Those last three telltale words reflect the general orientation of the book: Agnon’s narrators are either artfully designing or the unwitting instruments of an artful implied author, and, with very few exceptions, Agnon is seen to do no wrong. “Yekele” in fact was published by Yaron in two different versions, testimony to the unfinished state of some of the stories in this volume, and that makes the effort to rescue the coherence of many of them a bit problematic.

I would like to reflect briefly on Alan’s deep investment in *A City in Its Fullness*. It is a book with which he was preoccupied for the last decade or more of his life. I don’t think the way he was consumed by this volume can be entirely separated from his own serious, intelligently reflective commitment to traditional Judaism. That commitment surely played some role in his decision, after having taught at three universities, to move to the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary, where the instruction he offered in modern Hebrew literature could take place in a context of devotion to traditional Jewish texts. I suspect that the compelling focus he eventually adopted on Agnon’s Buczacz stories was motivated by a sense that the important contribution he was cut out to make to Agnon criticism, beyond his previous excellent work on this writer, was to show that this collection of stories, seen by some readers as an act of antiquarianism and a rather loose reversion to Agnon’s

early attachment to traditional storytelling, was actually a coherent achievement of the first order of originality, fully an equal to Agnon's best works in the tradition of European realism and literary modernism. Alan was certainly well positioned to undertake this task of rehabilitation. In *Ancestral Tales*, he repeatedly brings into play an intimate and authoritative knowledge of practices and values of the traditional Jewish world, and he evinces an impressive capacity of empathy with the mind-set and aspirations of the pious Jews of this vanished era, even as he clearly sees that, in many of the stories, the norms of piety are gravely compromised by the actual behavior of the pious. He understands better than any other critic Agnon's bold imaginative reach in attempting to recapture a Jewish Buczacz that had dwindled and then overnight was savagely destroyed. One should add that Alan was concerned with Hebrew responses to catastrophe as far back as his book *Hurban* (1984), and he proposes here that, in these stories, Agnon in effect redefines the basic strategy of literary response to the Shoah.

Yet Agnon's narrative implementation of his project sustains at best only intermittently the large claims made for it in this study. Where *Ancestral Tales* repeatedly invites us to see hidden architectonic strength even in stories that look digressive or perhaps even rambling, many readers will remain skeptical.

Agnon's posthumous volume raises, perhaps more than any other of his books, the question of how amenable he is to the understanding and enjoyment of readers whose sole access to him is through translation. One could cite a few encouraging responses over the years by intelligent literary critics reading him in translation. The earliest may be that of Walter Benjamin, who came to stories by Agnon in German translation in the teens and the twenties of the past century and saw him as a great writer (no doubt encouraged in part by his friend Gershom Scholem). Edmund Wilson, ever the diligent reader, turned to Agnon in translation when he traveled to Israel in the 1950s and then wrote about him admiringly in the *New Yorker*. The British critic John Gross reviewed *Two Tales* in the *New York Review of Books* in the 1960s and also registered a sense of him as a highly original writer. *Two Tales*, however, may be something of a special case because the two novellas it comprises, *Betrothed* and *Edo and Enam*, are spectacular modernist fictions, exhibiting intricate networks of motifs, a fascination with myth and the archaic, a sense of modern culture in crisis, and a blurring of the boundaries between dream and reality, all features

familiar to readers of modernist writing in other languages. By contrast, *A City in Its Fullness*, like a good many other works by Agnon, takes English readers into a world that is not merely exotic—part of the allure for Americans of the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer—but that is alien and perhaps even in some ways unfathomable.

The issue of Agnon's accessibility in translation, moreover, is immensely complicated by the distinctive coloration of his Hebrew style. His Hebrew readers are, of course, perfectly aware that he is a master stylist. His prose is artfully fashioned out of the materials of traditional Hebrew texts, chiefly rabbinic but in some cases also early modern (that is, the *sifrut yerei'im*, the "literature of the pious"), and it reflects only in a very limited way Agnon's presence in a modern Hebrew-speaking culture for most of his adult life. As such, it has become something of an obstacle for ordinary Israeli readers unfamiliar with the corpus of the early rabbis on which he usually draws. From his point of view, he writes in what is a classicizing Hebrew: "My language," he asserts in one of his stories, "is a simple language, the language of all the generations past and of all the generations to come." In the fiction set in pious milieus, this produces a seamless connection between the style and the represented world. In the fiction that deals with modern, often quite secular characters, this style redolent of a world many centuries removed generates a pervasive undertone of incipient irony. There are, moreover, many allusions to older texts introduced through the traditional formulations of the prose that add a complicating background of depth to the stories. It is hard to imagine any effective equivalent for this distinctive linguistic vehicle in modern Western languages. By and large, the English translators have chosen, perhaps prudently, to forego the archaizing aspect of Agnon's prose and represent him in ordinary modern English. A few have attempted to adopt some sort of stylized archaic English, generally with unfortunate effects. There have been a couple of rare successes, the most notable of which is probably Baruch Hochman's virtuoso rendering of "Agunot," Agnon's first published story after his arrival in Palestine, which employs a storyteller-narrator steeped in midrash and the realm of pious practice.

Let me offer just one extended example from *A City in Its Fullness* in order to highlight the general problem of accessibility. It is part of a section not included in the somewhat abridged English volume, so the translation cited is the one Alan provides in his book.

A nation worn down and vexed, which lacking the force of a monarch and his ministers and possessing only the authority of the Torah, comes together to formulate and promulgate decrees and ordinances that are accepted by the entire people like the edicts of kings. When a king establishes a police force to subdue the people by rod and whip and impose his decrees, they flaunt [clearly a slip for “flout”] those decrees, and many are the rebels who sin against the king’s will. Yet the holy people Israel willingly accepted all that was placed upon them by the eminences of the Council of Lands, which was like the Sanhedrin in the Chamber of Hewn Stone in the Temple.⁸

This is a perfectly competent rendering of the Hebrew—something often not true for Agnon’s translators—and one little flourish, the syntactic inversion of “many are the rebels who sin,” which emulates the Hebrew word order, is an especially nice touch. Yet, for reasons hardly the translator’s fault, the distinctive coloration of the language, a principal source of its charm for the informed Hebrew reader and a rhetorical warrant for the unhistorical claim that the Jews scrupulously followed all rabbinical and communal dictates, is barely perceptible in the English. The problems begin with the first phrase here, “A nation worn down and vexed.” An endnote dutifully explains that these words, which appear in Isaiah 18:2, are of obscure meaning in the biblical text. They almost certainly do not mean what Agnon suggests, for in Isaiah they refer to the alien Egyptians and might indicate something like “smooth-skinned and rangy.” Agnon, it is safe to assume, is basing his use of this verse on one or more Hebrew commentators. In any case, the effect of the introduction of the phrase for erudite Hebrew readers is precisely in their recognition that it is a phrase from Isaiah, to be relished in a small way for its ingenious application to the plight of the Jews under their Polish overlords.

The rest of this sentence does a creditable job of intimating the language of traditional discourse used to report the political dilemma of Eastern European Jews in the early modern period. But the beginning of the next sentence in this passage betrays a gap between the cultural framework of the translation and that of the original. “When a king establishes a police force” makes one think of men in blue uniforms with holsters and badges. The Hebrew, with the words immediately following, is

“melekh...ma‘amid shotrim sherodim et ha‘am bemaqel uveretsu‘ah”. “Establishes” is semantically accurate for *ma‘amid* but loses the midrashic flavor of the Hebrew by using a term associated with modern bureaucratic procedure. “Police force” for *shotrim* belongs to the wrong cultural realm. It is, to be sure, the term in modern Hebrew for “police,” but at the beginning of Exodus it is the word used for the “taskmasters” or “overseers” of the Hebrew slaves, and that is surely a connotation Agnon intended to emphasize, reinforcing it by the reference to rod and whip. I don’t mean to fault the translation, but to indicate the translator’s dilemma. To render *shotrim* as “taskmasters” would create an effect of somewhat bizarre archaism that might easily be off-putting for the English reader. It is not clear whether there is a viable English alternative.

In the final sentence of this passage, there are issues of historical reference as well as of diction. “The eminences of the Council of the Lands” is an acceptable English equivalent of the Hebrew but is unable to convey either the flavor of the original or the precise identity of the historical institution involved. “Eminences” represents *alufei umanhigei*. The compound construct form (*semikhut*) is a usage eschewed in classical Hebrew but current in the Hebrew of the period about which Agnon is writing. *Aluf* (biblical “chieftain”) for community leader is another period-appropriate stylistic mannerism flaunted by Agnon. The Council of the Lands is, of course, the self-governing body that administered the affairs of Polish Jewry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A Hebrew reader is likely to know this; an ordinary English reader would pick up a general idea that this must be some sort of political or quasipolitical entity but would know no more than that. The alternative of annotating the reference is wisely avoided in this translation. The broader point is that the Agnon stories set in the traditional world abound in so many references obscure to the English reader that to explain them all in notes would convert a work of fiction into a text for study. The same problem is evident at the end of this sentence: most English readers will know, more or less, what the Sanhedrin is, but the Chamber of Hewn Stone, *lishkat hagazit*, will suggest little more than some kind of room in the temple, whereas the knowledgeable Hebrew reader whom Agnon means to address will recognize it as the special chamber, cited in the Mishnah, where the Sanhedrin convened.

In all this, the English version conveys a serviceable enough sense of what is said in the Hebrew, but the pointed character of the allusions, steeped in the values

and mind-set of the traditional realm, the historical contexts invoked, and, above all, the midrashic and early modern feel of the Hebrew, will scarcely be felt. Agnon is certainly a virtuoso in the stylistic evocation of this vanished world, although I am not persuaded that such virtuosity in itself produces his greatest fiction. This whole phase of his work has, I have noted, no effective English equivalent, and so is likely to come across to English readers lacking much of its linguistic appeal and cultural intricacy.

Despite these issues of transmissibility, English readers should be grateful for the Toby Press's fifteen-volume series, heroically edited by Jeffrey Saks, which gives us a large part of Agnon's literary production, and for Alan's editorial role in putting together *A City in Its Fullness*. The series amply represents all phases of the writer's work, some of them fairly accessible and others not so much. It certainly offers an invaluable resource to any reader without Hebrew who has an interest in Agnon, although because of the stylistic and cultural considerations I have delineated, it is likely to be embraced mainly by a select readership, whether specifically Jewish or assiduously literary.

Difficulties of access are far less of a problem in Agnon's modernist fictions such as *Shira*, *Only Yesterday* (not in the Toby series, evidently for reasons of copyright), *The Hill of Sand*, *Betrothed*, *Edo and Enam*, and many mesmerizing short stories—to mention just a few: "Forevermore," "In the Forest and in the City," "The Lady and the Peddler," "The Doctor's Divorce"—although even in these something is inevitably lost in the stylistic allure of the Hebrew. I do not think that the stories assembled in *A City in Its Fullness* are likely to seize the imagination of many who can read them only in translation. What remains in order to rescue this aspect of Agnon's achievement for English readers is critical exposition by those who command both the Hebrew in all its nuances and the wide range of allusions and historical references deployed in the stories. This is precisely what *Ancestral Tales* aptly does. Perhaps in the end it may be less a guide to reading these tales than a learned substitute for reading them. Even if in some ways it may overstate the case for Agnon's posthumous volume, it certainly shows that there is often artistic sophistication in the seeming folksiness and even, at least in some instances, purpose and coherence in tales that would appear to meander. As Alan Mintz's last book, it is a worthy legacy.

2019

NOTES

- 1 Alan Mintz, *Ancestral Tales: Reading the Buczacz Stories of S. Y. Agnon* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 396.
- 2 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 74.
- 3 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 214.
- 4 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 123.
- 5 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 86.
- 6 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 228.
- 7 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 287.
- 8 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 214.