

QUEST N. 15 – REVIEWS

Alan Mintz, *Ancestral Tales: Reading the Buczacz Stories of S. Y. Agnon*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 440.

by Dario Miccoli

Of the many writers that make up the modern Hebrew literary canon, Shmuel Yosef Agnon is one of the best-known – as well as the most enigmatic. Born Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes in 1887 in the Galician town of Buczacz, at the time under Habsburg rule, he emigrated to Palestine in 1908, settling there definitively in the early 1920s, when he also assumed the pen name of Agnon. His works, from *shtetl* novels such as *Sippur pashut* (*A Simple Story*, 1935) to *Tmol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*, 1945), in which he narrates the epic of the Second Aliyah, and his many Kafkaesque short stories, have made Agnon one of the greatest Hebrew writers – in fact, one of the greatest Jewish writers – of the twentieth century. Agnon is also the only Israeli to date to have won the Nobel Prize in Literature, a distinction he was awarded in 1966.

Drawing on his profound knowledge of Agnon's oeuvre and of Jewish literature, Alan Mintz has written a masterful study of *'Ir u-melo'ah* (*A City in Its Fullness*, 1973), Agnon's posthumously published final *magnum opus*. Mintz passed away a short time prior to the appearance of his *Ancestral Tales* in print.

A collection of some one hundred and forty short stories about Agnon's hometown of Buczacz, *'Ir u-melo'ah* was written during the years beginning in the mid-1950s – or even earlier – and up to the time of Agnon's death. The volume saw posthumous publication thanks to the editorial work of Agnon's daughter, Emunah. Similar to *'Ir u-melo'ah* as an extraordinary Baedeker leading the reader on a tour of Buczacz, *Ancestral Tales* navigates the complexity of Agnon's book. As Mintz notes, Agnon's desire is not to write about Buczacz per se, but rather to build the city again after its destruction in the Holocaust – the ultimate catastrophe following the manifold societal and cultural shifts within the Jewish world in which the writer was born. Agnon's almost impossible task is “to fashion memories of life beyond the range of memory” (p. 3). To do this, he invents an imaginary narrator: a *pinkas* [chronicler] who recounts the history of Buczacz from the mid-seventeenth century, from the massacres of the Khmel'nitsky Revolt of 1648 up to the emancipation of Galicia's Jews in the mid-nineteenth century. The *pinkas* thus focuses on the golden age of Buczacz, leaving aside both the First World War and the Holocaust.

‘Ir u-melo’ah, Mintz rightly explains, stands as the opposite of the *yizker bikher* [commemorative books] compiled in the aftermath of the Second World War by Jewish survivors from vanished European Jewish communities. It is also far from the post-Holocaust literature of the 1950s and 1960s. This might be related to the tendency, which persevered in Hebrew literature into the 1960s, not to write about the Holocaust, as Mintz himself observes in *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*.¹ But more than that, it is perhaps an attempt by Agnon to talk in a mediated manner about “the last calamity” (p. 50), going backward to the moment when Buczacz was Buczacz – as the novelist used to say – and its streets pullulated with rabbis, Jewish shopkeepers and *yeshivah* students.

The eight chapters of *Ancestral Tales* focus on a number of themes and characters, so as to give the reader an idea of the richness of Agnon’s book: the first describes what Mintz calls “the grand tour of Buczacz” (p. 29) with its Jewish institutions and spaces; the second discusses Agnon’s invention of the *pinkas*. The third and fourth chapters address the theme of *torah ve-‘avodah* [study and worship] and its protagonists: from the *hazzanim* to the rabbis. The following three chapters take a more historical turn, looking at those stories of *‘Ir u-melo’ah* that have to do with the interaction between Jews and Poles, and with the societal changes that the enlightened absolutism of the Habsburg Empire provoked. The eighth – and last – chapter concentrates on the theme of redemption, which constitutes yet another crucial aspect of Agnon’s poetics.

Ancestral Tales is certain to be of interest first and foremost to Agnon fans and those familiar with his work. But going beyond this, Mintz takes *‘Ir u-melo’ah* as a point of departure for a broader discussion of the meanings of Jewishness and Jewish historical thinking: from the connection between history and literature, through the intertwined meanings of catastrophe and redemption, to the possibility of bringing a departed world back to (literary) life. To do this, in his book Agnon “heeds the call to build a city in its fullness” and “does so on his own terms [...] camouflag[ing] his modernism to immerse himself in the premodern world” (p. 394), transforming the readers “into honorary or virtual Buczaczers” (p. 396). The greatness of *‘Ir u-melo’ah* lies in the fact that it constructs another city, a Buczacz that only Agnon knew, one that metonymically stands for an entire lost *Yiddishkeit*. Here, Mintz seems to agree with Shaked’s idea of Agnon as “revolutionary traditionalist” and a writer who combines past and present, *lashon*

¹ Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

qodesh [sacred tongue] and *sfat hol* [mundane speech].² *‘Ir u-melo’ah* can thus be read as an “act of *tikkun*” (p. 251): an attempt to write a different kind of Jewish history.

In this connection, Mintz recalls a much-cited passage from Agnon’s short story *Hush ha-reah* (“Sense of Smell,” 1937), where the author confesses to be writing out of a sense of grief for the destroyed Temple, “like one exiled from his father’s palace who makes himself a little hut and sits there telling the glory of his father’s house” (p. 29). Agnon, in other words, cannot detach himself from tradition and its magical aura; he reinscribes it within the modern world in which he lives: Jerusalem, the *Yishuv* and then the State of Israel. His characters are fictional and real at the same time, and if his stories focus on historical events – such as the First Partition of Poland of 1772 – they always contain wholly absurd elements, too. It is by means of all this, Mintz argues, that the writer succeeds in constructing a cycle of stories that shows the beauty and the banality of Buczacz, always cherishing the feelings of “nostalgia and nightmare” for the diasporic world he left in his youth.³

As the protagonist of *Ha-siman* [*The Sign*] – the largely autobiographical story which, according to Emunah Agnon’s editorial comment, was supposed to conclude *‘Ir u-melo’ah* but which Mintz interprets as the entry point to the book as a whole – contends: “if my town has been expunged from the world, its name survives in the sign made for it by the poet in his poem” (Agnon cited by Mintz, p. 5). *Ha-siman*’s protagonist is referring to a *piyut* by the medieval poet Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, whose alphabetic acrostic forms the word “Buczacz”; the same could be said of Agnon’s book. If by writing *‘Ir u-melo’ah*, Agnon wanted to take his readers on a historical and literary voyage to Buczacz, then *Ancestral Tales* invites us to go back to Agnon – an author that, as the Israeli novelist Ruby Namdar admits, “is more respected than actually read.”⁴ This is due to Agnon’s difficult writing style and the simplistic understanding of this writer as a religious *Ostjuden* coming from a vanished world that bears little relevance to the world of today. As Mintz’s work demonstrates, nothing could be more wrong.

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² Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, (New York: New York University Press, 1989).

³ Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

⁴ Ruby Namdar, “On Agnonizing in English,” *Jewish Review of Books* (Summer 2017), available at: <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/2658/on-agnonizing-in-english/>.

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