

FICTION, FABLE, AND THE FACE OF
A GENERATION:
S. Y. Agnon's *Only Yesterday*

by

JEFFREY FLECK

Brown University

Only Yesterday, S. Y. Agnon's third major novel and the last to be published during his lifetime, focuses upon a specific historical moment and milieu—Palestine of the Second Aliyah—yet in theme and implication it is one of his most universal works. Indeed, in perhaps no other single work of fiction did Agnon succeed so brilliantly in bringing together two of the most fundamental and contradictory elements of his artistic imagination: an acute sense of historical processes and an existential vision which, while derived from that historical sense, clearly transcends it. As a novelist with a historical theme, Agnon wrote of the Jewish entry into modernity and, in particular, of the conflicts between tradition and modernity that this entry made inevitable. In his first novel, *The Bridal Canopy* (1931), he evoked traditional Jewish society in Central and Eastern Europe with an epic though ironically qualified sweep of imaginative reconstruction. In *A Guest for the Night* (1939), he provided a chilling account of the physical and spiritual disintegration of a Jewish community in Central Europe between the World Wars. *Only Yesterday* (1945) presents a complex portrait of efforts to re-establish Jewish life in Palestine during the "heroic" period of Zionist settlement. Finally, in *Shira*, published posthumously in 1974, Agnon brought his vision to bear upon life in Mandatory Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s. In all four novels, Agnon's preoccupation with the relationship between the past and the present, and with what Arnold Band has identified as the themes of "faith, identity, and home," are always apparent.¹

1. Writing before the publication of *Shira*, Arnold Band (1968, p. 414) noted that "while trilogic neither in intent nor in chronological order . . . the three novels do form a cycle in which each member is illuminated by the other two." In particular, Band finds in Agnon's first three novels "an unrelenting obsession with the broader problems of faith, identity, and home . . ."

But questions of faith, identity, and home are not only or even primarily historical issues and, indeed, history is for Agnon merely the arena in which underlying existential and spiritual issues are played out in the form of political and social conflict. Thus, historical detail and anecdote in Agnon's fiction are seldom free of more complex and often elusive symbolic implications. In many of his shorter works, in fact, the symbolic strain of Agnon's imagination all but displaces history. In the expressionist pieces collected in the *Book of Deeds* (1941), for example, events transpire in a phantasmal no-man's land where the distinction between reality and dream breaks down in a welter of displaced and condensed symbols and fragments of symbols. In the novels, on the other hand, symbol, allegory, fable, and the fantastic are woven into the historical texture so that the historical details themselves take on a symbolic coloration. It is not that historical "data" in the novels serve as the clothing or vehicle of deeper symbolic tenors. Rather, history and symbol in Agnon's fiction are locked in a dialectical tension: meanings generated on the symbolic level tend to subvert those generated on the historical level or, at the very least, suggest a logic that runs counter to the historical logic that dominates the novels' narrative foreground. Thus, and this is particularly true of *Only Yesterday*, his most overtly "historical" novel, Agnon writes at one and the same time about history and against history.

Agnon accomplishes this feat in *Only Yesterday* by, among other things, providing his novel with two protagonists, a would be *halutz* named Yitshak Kummer and a Jerusalem street dog called Balak. By interweaving the tales of his two protagonists, one a largely realistic story of failure, frustration, and death, the other a fable with obvious parallels to the human drama, Agnon creates a global structure that juxtaposes and places into constant opposition two radically different "readings" of essentially the same plot.² As a result, the dialectical tensions between realism and historical vision, on the one hand, and symbolism and existential vision, on the other, remain at a high pitch throughout the novel. It is unfortunate that many critics have felt it necessary to resolve the tension in favor of one side of the dialectic or the other. For it is precisely this tension, unresolved and unmitigated, that is the source of *Only Yesterday's* considerable power.

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2. That parts of the Balak fable appeared separately before the publication of the novel is relevant to a study of the genesis of the novel, less relevant to a study of the patterns and relationships generated by the global structure of the final version.

For a novel that deals, at least ostensibly, with what is conventionally viewed as the heroic period of Zionist settlement in Palestine, Yitshak Kummer is a disconcertingly unheroic hero. He is a thoroughly mediocre figure, quite passive by nature, and seemingly incapable of self-reflection or analysis. Moved only by vague desires and good intentions, Yitshak is unable to confront or even recognize the forces that frustrate his desires and subvert his ideals. Thus, his actions, when not simply the product of reflex or inertia, are typically ill-considered and lead, more often than not, to results the implications of which he seldom understands or pursues. Yitshak, Agnon's narrator insists, is not even an interesting character:

Yitshak did not make an impression on people. There are many young men like Yitshak, and one does not pay much attention to them. Yitshak excelled in neither looks nor conversation. If you happened to speak with him, you would not be enthusiastic about speaking with him again. If you met him in the market place several times, you still would not recognize him. With a youth like Yitshak, if you were not particularly fond of him you treated him as though he did not exist.³

While Yitshak is in no way exceptional, his decision to come to Palestine certainly is. From the very first lines of the novel, however, the narrator makes it clear that while Yitshak may be an idealist, he is also extremely naive. Thus, after evoking the messianic images of pastoral harmony and prosperity that Yitshak imagines he will find in Palestine ("In the evening, each man would sit under his own vine, under his own fig tree, while his wife and sons and daughters sat around him, happy in their labor and joyful in their rest . . ."), the narrator tells us rather bluntly that Yitshak is a "dreamer" and that his visions of the Land of Israel are really nothing more than a collection of fantasies. Nevertheless, bolstered by Zionist slogans and messianic fantasies, Yitshak sets off for Palestine, expecting to have little trouble joining the pioneers in their struggle to rebuild the Land. Yitshak is the innocent from the provinces, and because of his innate optimism and good will he accepts uncritically the hypocrisy and corruption of values with which he is, more often than not, confronted. Thus, passing through Lemberg on his journey to Palestine, he is impressed and inspired by a group of professional Zionist activists who treat him with bemused

3. *Kol Sippurav shel Semuel Yosep 'Agnon* (1971, V, p. 233). The English translations are my own.

4. Robert Alter analyzes the allusions to traditional sources in the opening passage of *Only Yesterday* in his essay, "Language and Realism" (1971, pp. 197-201).

condescension and provide him with a perfectly meaningless letter of introduction to the leaders of the *yāššūv*. Yitshak does not notice that even as they mouth the slogans of national revival in Palestine they clearly prefer the comfort and luxury that only the urban centers of Europe can offer. Once in Palestine, Yitshak falls easy prey to an unscrupulous innkeeper in Jaffa, and when he finally makes it into the countryside, he is rebuffed by the Jewish plantation owners who prefer cheap, experienced Arab labor to that of "dangerous" Zionists like himself.

Yitshak accepts his disappointments with cheerful equanimity, always confident that sooner or later he will begin building the Land. Even when he drifts back to Jaffa and hears the bitter complaints of the "veterans," Yitshak cannot be disillusioned or embittered. Yitshak's nature is to flow with the tide and, thus, when he is mistaken for a house painter in Jaffa, he accepts the job offered him and ends up with an emphatically urban trade. Giving himself over to the pleasures of a relatively prosperous bachelor life in Jaffa, he hardly seems to notice that he has abandoned his original reason for coming to Palestine.

Eventually, however, Yitshak is attacked by doubts and anxieties. He is disturbed by his haphazard abandonment of religious observance, his family's poverty back home in Galicia (to which the expense of his trip to Palestine contributed), and his sexual misadventure with Sonya, a liberated Jaffa type. These pangs of remorse and guilt, however, are always short-lived and never lead to action. Yitshak's powers of introspection are notably weak, and he is easily distracted from painful thoughts. It is only after he visits Petah Tikva, a successful Zionist agricultural settlement, that Yitshak is reminded of his failure to settle on the Land. No longer satisfied with his life in Jaffa, he sets out for Jerusalem, not at all sure of what he will find there or, for that matter, of what it is he is seeking.

Yitshak's adventures in Palestine, then, eventually bring him back to his point of departure, the world of tradition which he had abandoned in order to fulfill his Zionist dreams. After some time in Jerusalem, Yitshak gravitates toward Meah Shearim, the stronghold of traditional religious life in the Holy City. He is befriended by the pious Moshe Amram who he had met earlier on the boat to Palestine, lets his beard grow, begins to frequent the synagogues, and eventually courts Moshe Amram's granddaughter, Shifra, whose father is the well known fanatic, Reb Faysh. But Meah Shearim is only a twisted and distorted version of the world of tradition. It is dominated by Reb Faysh whose fanaticism had discredited him in Europe and by Reb Gronam Yekum Purkan whose grotesque fire and brimstone sermons transfix the crowds that flock to hear him. The two

truly pious figures of the novel, Moshe Amram and Reb Alter, the *mohel* from Yitshak's home town, keep their distance from the communal life of the quarter.

Nor is Yitshak destined to find refuge in this deceptively familiar world. His Galician origins, his worldly trade, and especially his Zionist background make Yitshak suspect in the eyes of the inhabitants of Meah Shearim. Even after his marriage to Shifra, which was carefully avoided by the "pious," Yitshak's social ostracism continues. He seems destined to be an eternal outsider until, standing one day at the edge of a crowd listening to one of Reb Yekum Purkan's sermons, he is attacked by a mad dog. After a week of terrible pain he dies.

The narrator's attitude toward Yitshak is a curious mixture of empathy and deprecation. Although he typically refers to Yitshak as "our comrade," he seems intent upon keeping him at arm's length and seldom passes up an opportunity to point out his deficiencies. Here, for example, is how the narrator evokes Yitshak's uneasiness over his abandonment of religious observance and his "affair" with Sonya:

Although Yitshak did not come to the Land of Israel for the sake of Torah and prayer, like that old man he had met on the boat and like so many other old men, still, he was sorry that his faith had weakened. Had his faith not weakened, he would not had done what he did. And since he recalled what he had done, he recalled Sonya. In truth, he did not take his mind off Sonya for even an hour, but he erred in thinking that he thought of her only because he wanted to correct his behavior toward her. (164)

After a summary statement noting Yitshak's sorrow over his "weakened faith," the narrator shifts briefly to *le style indirect libre* as Yitshak makes the connection between this weakening and his affair with Sonya ("Had his faith not weakened . . ."). The narrative voice, however, at once returns to report the immediate movement of Yitshak's thought ("And since he recalled what he had done . . .") and then Yitshak's general state of mind ("In truth, he did not take his mind off Sonya . . ."). Then, adding his superior judgment to his omniscience, the narrator calls attention to Yitshak's self-deception. Yitshak may believe that his intentions are pure, but the narrator knows better.

The narrator's criticism of Yitshak, however, is usually qualified by sympathetic understanding. If Yitshak fails to live up to his ideals or to come to grips with his failures, it is not the result of willful self-deception or hypocrisy on his part. Yitshak's failures, the narrator insists, are simply the result of his mediocrity. Thus, after describing a moment in which Yitshak finds release from his feelings of guilt through prayer ("Yitshak for-

got all his guilt and appeared in his own eyes like a child who has never sinned . . .”), the narrator goes on to explain why, for Yitshak, such “grace” can only be temporary:

But grace does not last, for it is the way of grace to appear only from time to time, especially to a man who is not worthy of having the light of grace shine upon him without interruption. No matter how much we attempt to speak in Yitshak’s favor, we must admit that he was no better than the rest of our comrades. What is there to say? We all seek the good, but the good which we seek is not the true good. (263)

Yitshak may not be worthy of uninterrupted grace, but this is so only because he is no better than the “rest of our comrades.” Yitshak fails to seek the true good, but of this, the narrator insists, we are all guilty.

Beneath the narrator’s often critical and at times condescending attitude, then, there is a fundamental sympathy for his naive and often foolish protagonist. Moreover, the narrator often displays a certain reticence in analyzing Yitshak’s inner life, a reticence that leads him, at times, to adopt a kind of selective omniscience. Here, for example, is how the narrator “analyzes” the reasons behind Yitshak’s decision to leave Jaffa, the site of his many failures, for Jerusalem:

Yitshak returned to work, or rather, let’s be honest, he did not return to work but to a life of idleness. Before his visit to Petah Tikva, Sonya was the cause of his idleness; after he returned from Petah Tikva, other causes came. Whatever the case, Yitshak realized that here it was not good for him and that he had to go somewhere else. (181)

The narrator knows that Yitshak’s preoccupation with Sonya was the cause of his idleness before his trip to Petah Tikva. As for his idleness after the trip, however, he seems less certain, or at least less willing to confide in the reader, and thus hedges by simply referring to “other causes” without offering any further explanation. Indeed, the narrator seems to suggest that such explanation is irrelevant and that it is enough for us simply to know that Yitshak felt he had to “go somewhere else.” This equivocation on the part of the narrator works at least two ways. On the one hand, it intimates the unconscious and overdetermined nature of Yitshak’s motives. At the same time, however, by refusing to reveal or analyze those motives, and even suggesting their irrelevance, it undermines the classically realistic notion of “character” as a moral agent whose unity of being is reflected by his action.

Yitshak’s status as a “character” in the classical sense is further eroded by the narrator’s intentional obfuscation—indeed, his near-denial—of a

cause-and-effect relationship between intention and action in his description of the first confrontation between Yitshak and the novel's other protagonist, Balak. Yitshak is painting a building on the outskirts of Meah Shearim when Balak, seeking water in the drought-stricken city, is attracted to Yitshak's moist brush. At first, Yitshak tries to drive the dog away, but when Balak persists, he ends up painting the words "mad dog" on Balak's back. Here is how the narrator describes the moment.

Yitshak took one of his brushes, but he did not know whether he meant to threaten the dog with it or if he meant to wipe it on the dog's coat . . . Yitshak's arm stretched out and his hands began to tremble . . . He extended the paint brush toward the dog and the dog extended himself toward Yitshak . . . We do not know whether he originally intended to write what he wrote, or if in the end it merely seemed to him that he wrote it on purpose. But why should we involve ourselves with doubtful things? Better we should observe his action. (275)

The indeterminacy of Yitshak's thought processes (" . . . but he did not know whether . . .") is here matched by the narrator's own equivocation and ultimate disclaimer of special knowledge ("We do not know whether . . ."). As in the previous passage, the narrator momentarily abdicates his role as omniscient narrator and, instead, adopts the stance of an outside observer who can only speculate about Yitshak's intentions. And as before, the narrator finally admits his impatience with such speculation ("But why should we involve ourselves with doubtful things?").

By refusing to speculate about "doubtful things" and urging that we do the same, the narrator suggests not only that the ultimate source of Yitshak's behavior cannot be easily ascertained, but that it is largely irrelevant to the story he is telling. Indeed, for all the narrator reveals about Yitshak, there remains a gap in his character, an area to which we have no access and for which the narrator sees no reason to provide access. Yitshak's "refusal" to part with his innocence and naiveté, his utter passivity in the face of the social, cultural and historical upheavals that surround him, and the docility with which he allows circumstance and chance to determine his fate are left, finally, unexplained.

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In spite of the emphasis I have placed on the presentation of Yitshak Kummer, *Only Yesterday* is by no means simply the story of one man's fate. On the contrary, Yitshak's story is embedded in a sweeping evocation of the Second Aliyah and it is clear that one of Agnon's goals in writing

the novel was to capture the unique atmosphere of this special historical moment. Thus, the historical and social setting of the novel is highly articulated and encompasses the major centers of Jewish settlement in Palestine. Yitshak's story is periodically interrupted by historical anecdotes describing the struggles and triumphs of the early Zionist pioneers, while satirical passages and vignettes poke fun at the inflated claims and hypocrisy that Yitshak often encounters as he attempts to realize his ideals. There is, moreover, an abundance of local color and numerous lyrical descriptions of town and country. And a host of secondary characters—pioneers, uprooted intellectuals, pious farmers and religious fanatics, artists, artisans, politicians, including a few well-known historical figures—weave their way through the novel.

Underlying and giving shape to this profusion of historical and quasi-historical detail is Agnon's familiar concern with the relationship between tradition and modernity. As Arnold Band points out, the action of the novel oscillates between two "emotional and ideational poles" (1968, p. 419): "modern" Jaffa with its Zionist pioneers and politicians, on the one hand, and "traditional" Jerusalem with its quiet pietists and more vocal fanatics. As Yitshak himself oscillates between these poles, he encounters a wide variety of stances toward the past. Thus, in the Zionist milieu of Jaffa, he shares the life-style (if not the ideological platform) of the pioneers who attempt to escape tradition and the "galut mentality" by devoting themselves to the most crude forms of physical labor, hears speeches in which Zionism is held up as the path to the political and social normalization of the Jewish people, listens intently as Y. H. Brenner expounds upon the physical and spiritual regeneration to be derived from working the soil, and listens, as well, when Zionism is portrayed as a modern permutation of Jewish tradition, a kind of secular messianism. In Jerusalem, on the other hand, Yitshak is moved by the calm, traditional piety of Moshe Amram and Reb Alter, witnesses at close hand the fanaticism of Reb Faysh whose chief weapons against encroaching secularism are spiritual terror and excommunication, and is even attracted to the fire and brimstone sermons of Reb Gronam Yekum Purkan and his uncompromising denunciations of the "sinful generation." Pointedly, the only person whom Yitshak meets who succeeds in bridging the gulf between tradition and modernity, Menachem, belongs to neither Jerusalem nor Jaffa. But Menachem is an exceptional and rather lonely figure. For Yitshak, who is often lonely but never exceptional, Menachem's solution is clearly beyond reach.

Indeed, Yitshak hardly seems to be aware of the existence of that gulf

and, in any case, has neither the ability nor the inclination to consider, for example, distinctions between traditional and secular messianism. Yitshak came to Palestine with Zionist slogans and prophetic visions of the messianic age neatly fused in his mind, and his experiences in Palestine, rather incredibly, do nothing to sunder this naive synthesis. As a result, Jaffa, for all its liveliness and élan, fails to provide the spiritual security he needs. And while Jerusalem seems to offer that sense of security, it cannot make him forget his failure to live up to his Zionist ideals.

Caught thus between two worlds, Yitshak would seem to have much in common with the familiar figure of the *ṯālūš*, or "uprooted man" of turn-of-the-century Hebrew fiction. But if Yitshak belongs to the *ṯālūš* family, he is a poor relation indeed. In the works of Berdyczewski, Fierberg, and Brenner, for example, the *ṯālūš* boldly confronts his fate of homelessness, fully aware of the price he must pay for his spiritual and intellectual integrity. And while his quest is doomed to failure, the single-mindedness with which he pursues it endows him with heroic stature. The death or madness with which these stories typically conclude is the inevitable denouement of a heroic struggle with an implacable fate. Yitshak, on the other hand, is an innocent bystander, at most only partially responsible for his fate and not at all aware of the stakes involved in the struggle which, in any case, he does not pursue. Nor does Yitshak's death carry the significance that we associate with the death of the *ṯālūš*. Rather than a tragic apotheosis, it is a sudden intrusion into an aimless life gone awry.

While the earlier Hebrew novelists, then, saw in the clash between tradition and modernity an opportunity for heroism—a particularly painful and modern form of heroism, to be sure⁵—Agnon sees, in the case of Yitshak Kummer at least, only victimhood. The historical vision embodied in *Only Yesterday* does not pit the individual against history in a struggle in which the individual's spiritual triumph is predicated upon his physical defeat or annihilation. Rather, the individual is viewed as the plaything of historical forces, the victim of objective and inevitable processes—even though they may take the form of chance and coincidence—that sweep man before them and then, when he least expects it, crush him.

Yitshak's role in the articulation of this historical theme helps explain the gaps which we noted earlier in the presentation of his "personality," as

5. Lionel Trilling (1968, pp. 57-88) writes in his essay, "The Fate of Pleasure," of modern literature's "spiritual heroes" and of the role that suffering plays in their efforts to reach a spiritual plain beyond the "specious good" of bourgeois culture. In this sense, Y. H. Brenner's protagonists might be considered among the most spiritual of heroes to emerge from modern Hebrew fiction.

well as the narrator's reluctance to reveal or ponder Yitshak's inner life. One could, to be sure, ignore the narrator's advice and describe Yitshak's malady in properly clinical terms. But such analysis would not only distract us from the novel's historical theme, it would undermine it altogether. Rather than a victim of historical forces, Yitshak would become a victim of his own limitations and eccentricities, a victim, in short, of a psychological disfunction. *Only Yesterday*, however, is not a psychological study of the mediocrity, passivity, or vulnerability of its protagonist, but, rather, a study of the terrible impact that historical and cultural upheaval can have upon the mediocre, the passive, and the vulnerable.⁶ Yitshak is the kind of character he is because the historical vision at the heart of the novel demands such a protagonist. His actions determined by circumstance and chance, his consciousness a kind of empty vessel in which experience is dissipated in intellectual and spiritual lethargy, Yitshak's ultimate fate is neither a tragic affirmation of the human spirit nor a revelation of its psychological fragility. It is, rather, a confluence of extrapersonal forces that could no longer be avoided.

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If Yitshak does his best to avoid confronting the forces that ultimately seal his fate, Balak, *Only Yesterday's* canine protagonist, actively seeks just such a confrontation and devotes all his canine energies to the task. For as a result of Yitshak's absent-minded prank, Balak suddenly finds himself a feared and hated outcast. Taking the words Yitshak had painted on his coat at face value, the people of Meah Shearim flee from him in terror. Later, chased and stoned wherever he turns, Balak is forced to flee for his life and wander among the Gentiles of the Old City who cannot read the Hebrew words that have sealed his fate among the Jews. Distressing as his sudden exile is, however, it is the apparent gratuitousness of that exile that really torments Balak. It eventually dawns upon him that his encounter with the house painter contributed to his present circumstances, but the significance of the words painted on his back continues to elude him:

Come and see [he complains at one point]: Everyone who sees me knows the truth about me, while I, the bearer of that truth, remain ignorant. (291)

In the end, Yitshak's unwitting prophecy is fulfilled. Tormented by a life of exile, weakened by the harsh drought that has settled over Jerusalem,

6. Efforts by some critics to provide an explanation by treating Balak as a symbolic key to Yitshak's inner life are discussed later in this essay.

and obsessed with his search for the "truth," Balak goes mad. When he finally returns to Meah Shearim, it is to seek out the author of his fate, under the delusion that he can make the truth flow out of Yitshak just as the Great Dog of canine tradition brought forth rain from the firmament by piercing it with his teeth.

Now the meaning of this intrusion of a fabulistic narrative into an otherwise realistic novel has been the focus of much critical discussion. Some critics, relying upon various psychological models, have regarded Balak as a symbolic key to the opaque personality of Yitshak Kummer. Thus, noting that dogs often appear in the novel in contexts involving women and sex, Baruch Kurzweil (1970, pp. 95-115) concludes that Balak symbolizes Yitshak's erotic drives. Reconstructing Yitshak's personality along vaguely Freudian lines, Kurzweil argues that it is Yitshak's abandonment of the restraints of traditional Jewish society, and in particular the sexual restraints, that lies at the heart of his problems. Yitshak's encounters with Balak, according to this scheme, are a symbolic externalization of Yitshak's inner struggle with a liberated Eros. Turning to Jung for aid, Baruch Hochman (1970, pp. 140-141) sees Balak as a kind of alter-ego, "externalizing Yitshak's instincts in the no-man's land outside the limits of Yitshak's conscious life." Thus, according to Hochman, when Balak finally attacks Yitshak, the latter is in fact "succumbing to his own rage and terror." Meshulam Tokner (1968, pp. 69-79), too, regards Yitshak and Balak as two sides of a split personality, but setting out from different premises he comes to very different conclusions. For Tokner, the struggle between Yitshak and Balak symbolizes the conflict of the modern Jew between an irretrievable past and an uncertain future. Whereas Yitshak represents the unconscious, emotional, and "atavistic" desire to return to the past, Balak, who prevents this return, represents the "doubt-ridden consciousness" of the modern Jew. Thus, rather than symbolizing the unconscious or instinctual elements of Yitshak's personality, Balak, according to Tokner, "embodies the crisis of Judaism."

Treating Yitshak and Balak as two elements or emanations of one personality does seem to solve several apparent difficulties. For one thing, it justifies Agnon's deviation from the realistic norms he establishes in the first half of the novel. Through the fable, the unconscious roots of Yitshak's malaise, only hinted at in the realistic sphere of the novel, are made explicit. Or, if we follow Tokner's interpretation, the specific historical factors that determine Yitshak's fate are, through the fable, given precise, allegorical expression. In either case, the final, fatal encounter between man and dog at the end of the novel is provided with a clear symbolic justifi-

cation. It represents, depending upon whose view you accept, the triumph of repressed drives that had been seething all along beneath the placid narrative surface, or the "end of the illusion of reconciliation" between the past and present.

There are, however, crucial limitations in attempting to fuse Yitshak and Balak into one composite personality. Balak, after all, has a distinct life of his own, and Agnon develops his character and fate with at least as much care as he does that of his human protagonist. Thus, to reduce Balak to a simple externalization of unconscious drives violates our sense of his vitality and integrity as a fictional personage. In spite of his canine habits, Balak suffers real anguish, and is able to express that anguish far more articulately than his human counterpart. As Tokner correctly observes, it is Balak who is the "dialectician" while Yitshak typically caves in to vague emotions and impulse. As a result, Balak is in many ways a more appealing character than Yitshak, and one can indeed argue, as does Eli Shvaïd, that he emerges as the real hero of the novel.⁷

What is perhaps most disturbing about these attempts to interpret the Balak fable, however, is the need the critics apparently feel to render it intelligible by reducing it to a simple allegory, to come up with—in spite of the narrator's own protests and warnings—an unequivocal and definitive "meaning." It is as if they view the fable's ambiguities as mere obstacles which it is the critic's duty to circumnavigate at all costs. The psycho-theological interpretation of Yitshak's character that Kurzweil derives from the Balak fable will come as no surprise to readers familiar with Kurzweil's work. He discovers a similar "meaning" at the heart of nearly all the works of modern Hebrew literature he analyzes. Tokner makes no effort to disguise his allegorical intent, as the title of his book, *Pešer 'Agnôn* ('Cipher to Agnon') makes clear. And in true allegorical fashion, Tokner's "deciphering" of the Balak fable reduces it to an unambiguous and rather commonplace historical schema. In spite of the enigmatic qualities that Agnon gives to the fable, it is not totally indeterminate or meaningless. But in addition to the fact that these allegorical interpretations ignore the positive functions that ambiguity may fulfill, they aim for a degree of specificity that needlessly closes off the horizon of meaning which is the very source of the fable's power.

7. "If a parallel exists between man and dog, it is the latter's role that is decisive, and if their fates reflect upon each other, it is not the dog who is the animal-like reflection of Yitshak, but rather Yitshak is the human reflection of the dog . . . He [Balak] reveals the ridiculous but real canine farce that lies beneath the melancholy aspect of the human drama." (Shvaïd, 1964, p. 50)

However, to insist upon Balak's status in the novel as a character in his own right, or upon the enigmatic qualities of his fable, is not to deny the obvious parallels that exist between man and dog in *Only Yesterday*. On the contrary, it is precisely through an examination of these parallels, and the variety of ways in which Agnon pursues them, that we can begin to clarify the relationship between the novel's two protagonists and, ultimately, the role that Balak and his fable play in the overall structure of the novel. As Gershon Shaked has amply demonstrated in his study of Agnon's shorter fiction, the technique of narrative parallelism and analogy is central to Agnon's art (1973, pp. 47-64). Typically, Agnon develops a series of apparently random, loosely linked sub-plots which, upon closer inspection, represent subtle but meaningful variations upon one narrative or thematic structure. Now, the parallels between the fates of Yitshak Kummer and Balak are clear enough. Both are uprooted from their homes by forces beyond their understanding and control. Both seek to put an end to their uprootedness by returning to the world from which they had been exiled. And for both, the attempt to return ends in madness and death.

Having set up these outward parallels between Yitshak's story and the Balak fable, however, Agnon spares no effort in obscuring the "deeper" connections between the stories. One way he does this is by periodically stressing the artificiality of the fable and flaunting the gap between the tale and its meaning. Thus, within the fable itself Agnon includes a satirical account of the efforts of the "opinion makers" of Jaffa to come up with its true meaning:

One would say there is a hidden meaning here; another would say that the hidden meaning must be inferred from the plain meaning. Yet no one could agree on what the plain meaning was. Meanwhile, opinions proliferated until there were as many opinions as there were people in the city of Jaffa. (459)

By "baring the device" in this way, Agnon places the reader (and the literary "opinion maker") in a difficult situation. Having thrown into question the very legitimacy of allegorical interpretation, the novelist can evoke possibilities of meaning even as he subverts our efforts to pin it down.⁸

"The historian," Agnon's non-committal narrator comments at one point, "will have to labor a great deal before he will discover where men's affairs end and the affairs of dogs begin." (470) This deliberate obscuring of the border between the human and animal realms is the source of much of the enigmatic quality of Agnon's fable. For Balak's story does not sim-

8. On some uses of "enigmatic" allegory, see Culler (1975, pp. 229-230).

ply represent an inferior, degraded, or "bestialized" version of the human drama. Balak is, to be sure, emphatically canine. "Balak," the narrator tells us, "was a simple dog and did not concern himself with matters that exceed the bounds of common sense." (468) Even as he suffers the pangs of exile, Balak pursues the habitual pleasures of his species. He sniffs, he scratches, he relieves himself in suitable nooks and crannies. His immediate concerns are to find a comfortable hole in which to curl up for the night, a bone to gnaw upon, a chance to snarl at one of his enemies. But in some ways Balak is more "human" than his human counterpart and, indeed, displays many of the heroic qualities of the *talûš* as he was often portrayed in earlier Hebrew novels. Balak is far more articulate and assertive than Yitshak, far more typical of the *talûš* in his critical self-consciousness and intellectual honesty. Unlike Yitshak, Balak insists upon confronting his fate and uses all of his canine powers to discover the reason behind his exile. Rather than ignoring or evading fundamental issues, he pursues them relentlessly and, as a result, he goes mad.

The manner in which Agnon insists upon Balak's superior intellectual and spiritual qualities, on the one hand, and his earthy canine disposition, on the other, has much in common with Kafka's manipulation of the fable form in which "less-than-human beings . . . inevitably turn out to possess more-than-human qualities" (Politzer, p. 90). Thus, in the course of presenting a dispassionate and absolutely lucid account of his former life as an ape, the speaker in Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" can point out in passing that the "fine, clear train of thought" which led to his decision to become human ". . . must have [been] constructed somehow within my belly, since apes think with their bellies" (1952, p. 172). Similarly, Kafka's dog in "Investigations of a Dog" who, like Balak, becomes obsessed with his search for the truth ("For all the senseless phenomena of our existence, and the most senseless by far of all, are susceptible of investigation") has to begin with what, for a dog, is the "essence of all knowledge," the injunction, "Water the ground as much as you can" (1952, pp. 225, 215). For Kafka, as for Agnon, the animal-speakers of his fables are both less-than-human and more-than-human, seekers of clarity and truth yet condemned to pursue their investigations from within their animal perspective and sensibility.

While such a situation can be a source of great pathos, Agnon, again like Kafka, exploits the comic potential of his fable-creature's distinctly canine sensibility to great effect. Balak's investigations into the truth about his fate, for example, are mixed with learned digressions on various aspects of canine lore, a branch of learning that includes history, legend,

myth, as well as science and psychology. Balak draws inspiration from one of his illustrious ancestors (just as Yitshak draws inspiration from his ancestor, Reb Yudel Hasid) who, according to canine tradition, at one time ruled over a large part of Jerusalem. It was a dog, according to Balak and canine cosmology, who was responsible for the creation of the rains, as well as the moon and the stars. "That is why," the narrator remarks, "dogs bark at the moon; they are recalling the great labor of their ancestor, the Great Dog . . ." (474). From his knowledge of dogs and his observation of men, Balak finds ample evidence for the widespread canine belief that dogs were originally men who, having rebelled against the Creator, were condemned to their present status. About this belief, the narrator offers the following equivocation:

We do not know if Balak held this opinion as a result of extreme naiveté or whether it was based upon observation, since he had seen many human beings with canine dispositions. (472)

The canine comedy that Agnon erects around Balak's fable balances precariously upon the calculated ambiguity of this remark. Threading its way through the last rather somber chapters of the novel, the Balak fable offers welcome comic relief from the lugubrious course of Yitshak's gradual decline. Yet the narrator's constant if muted suggestions of a more serious connection between man and dog forces us to wonder whether it is simply Balak's canine sensibility that is responsible for his opinions, or whether there is something more to the apparent foolishness. Are we in the end supposed to take Balak seriously and, if so, how seriously?

By reducing the human drama of *Only Yesterday* to canine proportions and constantly playing upon the comic "bisociation" of the human and animal realms that is made possible by the fable form, Agnon effectively parodies Yitshak Kummer's struggle and, indeed, the entire *tālūs* tradition.⁹ As the Russian Formalists recognized, however, the essence of parody lies not only in its comic rejection of old forms, but in its ability to find new possibilities of expression in them. As Victor Erlich (1965, p. 258) describes it, "the old is presented, as it were, in a new key. The obsolete device is not thrown overboard, but repeated in a new incongruous context and thus either rendered absurd . . . or made 'perceptible' again." The

9. The term "bisociation" is used by Arthur Koestler to describe the "clash between two mutually incompatible codes, or associative contexts" which is, for him, the fundamental mechanism of humor. Because they behave as if they were human without losing their animal appearance, the animal-creatures of fable "live on the line of intersection of the two planes" (Koestler, 1964, pp. 35, 67)

new context in this case is the canine world and sensibility of Balak and while the incongruity of this context casts an absurd light upon the human drama, the humor of the parody is darkened by the paradoxical fact that the canine perspective, in spite of its "extreme naiveté," or perhaps precisely because of it, turns out to be far superior to the human perspective. As a result, even as we smile at Balak's limitations, we also come to sympathize with him. If Yitshak's passivity and mute acceptance are difficult to understand, we have no difficulty understanding why Balak insists upon discovering the source of his own exile:

Why am I cast out of the whole world? Why does everyone seek my life? Have I done anyone harm? Have I bitten anyone? Then why do they pursue me so that my bones have no rest? Balak directed his complaint to heaven and howled, *hav, hav*, let me have a place to rest, let me have justice! (475)

Balak, for all his limitations and canine quirks, understands precisely what is at stake in the fate he shares with his human counterpart and can articulate both his understanding and his protest in a manner that would be unthinkable from Yitshak Kummer. "It is great art in my view," the narrator-hero of *A Guest for the Night* says at one point, "when one speaks of happy things with a sad voice and of sad things in a happy voice." Following the advice of the Guest, Agnon explores the most sinister aspects of Yitshak Kummer's fate in a fable that is also a comic *tour de force*.

But the fable does more than provide a "happy voice" in which to make explicit the very sad point of Yitshak's story. The fable form is by its very nature an abstracting medium, encouraging us to look beyond the specific instance to the more general and universal. Thus, while Yitshak's fate is firmly embedded in the social geography of the Second Aliyah, the Balak fable wrenches that fate from its historical matrix and, as a result, gives it unmistakable metaphysical overtones. If Yitshak, in his role as *talūs*, represents a generation victimized by overwhelming circumstances, Balak emerges as an archetypal figure whose fate encompasses but finally transcends temporal and spatial boundaries. For Balak, history is not the culprit but rather the human (or, in his case, the canine) condition.

Let us compare, by way of illustration, the role that insanity plays in the *talūs* tradition with Agnon's treatment of Balak's decline into madness. Nahman, the protagonist of Fierberg's *Whither?*, is torn between his loyalty to the Jewish world of his upbringing and the promise of spiritual freedom and growth that seems to exist only beyond the narrow confines of tradition. Unable to understand Nahman's struggle, the local Jewish community attributes his erratic behavior to mental deficiency, and he is soon referred to as Nahman the *mešuggā'*. While the epithet is clearly ex-

aggerated, Nahman does indeed become a reclusive malcontent, rocked by alternating bouts of despair and fantastic visions of Jewish revival in the Near East. Feuermann, the protagonist of Brenner's *In Winter*, similarly despairs over his inability to sever the bonds that tie him to his Jewish past, and his efforts in this direction lead him to the verge of madness and suicide. And madness is indeed the fate of Ya'akov Abramson, the protagonist of Brenner's second novel, *Beside the Point*. Abramson is divided between his loyalty to Hebrew literature as a means to Jewish national revival and the more fashionable "universalistic" ideals urged upon him by Hava, the object of his erotic longings. Just as he seems ready to abandon his Jewish preoccupations, news of violent pogroms in several Jewish communities reaches him. This new development is too much for him and, once more caught between conflicting loyalties, he suffers a nervous breakdown. In the *talūs* literature, then, madness is essentially a social malady whose origins are firmly rooted in the circumstances of Jewish life in the modern world. It is the fate of men who, searching for a new, liberated existence, abandon the moribund precincts of their native ground and, as a result, find themselves caught between two worlds, neither of which they can call home. The *talūs* is a victim of an age of transition and crisis; in better times and circumstances he might have maintained his balance.

Balak, like the conventional *talūs*, and like Yitshak, is uprooted from his native ground. His madness, however, is not so much a result of external circumstances as it is the outcome of his desire to discover the "truth" behind those circumstances. There must be, Balak insists, a reasonable explanation for his sudden exile, and he spares no efforts to discover it. As the narrator explains:

There is a covenant with the truth so that whoever seeks it, seeks all of it. Such was Balak. Since he had put his mind to the truth, he was not satisfied with a part of it, but wanted to know the whole truth. (292)

Ironically, Balak discovers the truth about his exile early in his quest, but he dismisses it as too unreasonable:

Balak wagged his tail and said, it's just as I suspected. I have only others to blame for my troubles. It is on account of that n'er-do-well who put some marks on my back. But do I deserve to be pursued just because some n'er-do-well wrote some words on my back? (292)

Balak will only be content with a reasonable explanation for his fate; to ascribe it to a thoughtless prank boggles even the canine imagination.

Balak's attempts to discover the "whole truth" always end in frustration. Wherever he turns he sees clear and invariably painful evidence of his

new status as exile, but nowhere can he find an explanation for it. Nevertheless, he refuses to give up and his quest for the truth quickly becomes an all-consuming obsession. At times delirious, at other times too lucid for his own good, Balak's thought processes lapse into a kind of runaway cerebration in which sense and nonsense contend with each other.

Balak gathered up his legs, closed his eyes and, lying there, reflected upon the same things over which thinkers of all generations have labored. What are we? What is our life? Are all the pains and torments and troubles that afflict us worth the little, ephemeral comforts we seek? Especially for the likes of me, one who lacks even the simplest comfort, who knows only endless labors, each one more exhausting than the last. (575)

Balak, for the moment, sees clearly into his fate and can reflect upon it in the same terms that "thinkers of all generations" have reflected upon similar fates. In the face of unexplained suffering and the inevitable torments and afflictions that are the fate of all living beings, what, Balak asks, is the purpose of our lives and our strivings for comfort and pleasure? It is just such moments of lucidity, however, that push Balak to the edge of madness. Thus, immediately following these reflections, as Balak begins to take note of his deteriorating mental condition, his thought dissolves into a hodge-podge of bits of scholastic science, philosophy, psychology, folklore and superstition:

Balak . . . was not inclined to the opinion of philosophers who contend that madness comes from black bile rather than from evil spirits. He accepted only a part of their claim; black bile is the immediate cause, but it, in turn, is caused by evil spirits . . . And there can be no doubt that the evil spirits who haunted the windmill created the black bile . . . since, as is well known, nothing in nature suffers a vacuum. Since the windmill had been deserted by men, the evil spirits had made it their home. (575-576)

This jumble of scholastic sense and superstitious nonsense distracts Balak, and the reader, from the somber implications of his earlier reflections. The question of unexplained suffering seems to get lost in the shuffle, and the spiritual origin of Balak's madness is reduced to questions of black bile, evil spirits, and vacuums. The distraction, however, is only temporary. Balak does not give up his search for the truth, and, in the end, he returns to Meah Shearim to find it, even though he knows such a return means certain death.

Madness, then, is the price Balak pays for struggling to make sense out of an absurd fate, for contending with forces he cannot identify, much less confront. In this sense, he has more in common with Joseph K. than with Kafka's animal-protagonists. For someone has apparently traduced Ba-

lak, and he is condemned to a futile search for the source and substance of the claim held against him. And like Kafka's protagonist, the more Balak searches for this "truth," the more distant and elusive it seems to be. Now in *The Trial* we never learn precisely what it is that Joseph K. is guilty of; like the accused man himself, the reader can only speculate as to the nature of the omnipresent but elusive court's proceedings.¹⁰ In the case of Balak, however, the reader knows at the outset that no crime has been committed and the Balak's "punishment" is as absurd and meaningless as it appears to its victim. When he demands justice from the silent heavens, then, Balak's "naiveté" sounds anything but canine.

Balak finds neither justice nor truth, but, upon his return to Meah Shearim, he does find Yitshak Kummer. Noting that of all the inhabitants of the quarter only Yitshak shows no fear of him and recalling their earlier encounter, Balak becomes convinced that Yitshak possesses the truth that he desperately seeks. Rocked by despair and rage, Balak attacks Yitshak, believing that the truth will flow from Yitshak's wounds just as the "blessed rains" fell from the sky when the Great Dog pierced the firmament. This last confrontation between Yitshak and Balak marks the final convergence of the realistic and fabulistic spheres of *Only Yesterday*. Balak, the "allegorical" dog, becomes a flesh and blood presence and, intruding himself into the realistic course of events, brings it to a sudden, if not totally unexpected, conclusion. The effect of this narrative sleight of hand is to confirm our suspicions that the "truth" which Balak had been pursuing is the same "truth" that Yitshak, until now, has successfully evaded. In their first encounter, Yitshak had condemned Balak to a life of exile and alienation by labeling him a mad dog. Now, Yitshak's unwitting prophecy having been fulfilled, Balak's infectious bite undoes Yitshak's efforts to end his own "exile" by establishing himself in Meah Shearim. Man and dog are destined to share the same fate. Indeed, rumors later circulate in Meah Shearim that toward the end of his ordeal Yitshak crawled about on all fours and howled like a mad dog.

If Yitshak's story suggests the powerlessness of the individual before the crushing circumstances of history, Balak's fate suggests the futility of man's efforts to elicit meaning from those circumstances, to discover the

10. "... within the parabolical framework of the novel K.'s guilt acquires the mysterious air of complete impenetrability. Remaining to the last undefined, it appears also all-encompassing, just as K., by remaining a nondescript Everyman, appears as universally typical" (Poltzner, 1966, p. 117). For this reason, Poltzer holds that the main subject of Kafka's novel is not the "paradox of K.'s guilt" but the "much more vexing paradox of the Law that violated itself by his arrest."

"truth" that lies behind them. Whether one evades the "truth" or attempts to confront it, man remains the plaything of forces beyond his control and understanding. Insofar as we are all victims of an impenetrable fate, the fable suggests, we are all uprooted men. And insofar as we insist upon discovering the "truth" about that fate, our naive and futile efforts take on a ridiculous canine quality. If, as Reb Gronum Yekum Purkan asserts, "the face of the generation is the face of a dog," it is the face of a generation engaged in a futile and ultimately farcical quest for a "truth" that is as absurd as it seems.

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