

# **“A Thousand Names They Called Him”**

**Naming and Proper Names in the work of S.Y. Agnon**

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## **Abstract**

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This dissertation offers a study of proper names and naming as a conceptual and thematic anchor in the work of S.Y. Agnon. Proper names, I argue, constitute an underexplored and highly fruitful prism through which to read literature, and specifically Agnon’s fiction. My study consists of a series of readings in several of Agnon’s major and most interpreted texts, all considered milestones of Modern Hebrew literature. Reading these works through the lens of proper names exposes facets of the texts that went largely unobserved by earlier readers, and yields a new understanding of them. The study’s primary concern is to determine what names are capable of telling us about Agnon’s texts. A secondary concern that emanates from my readings is the converse question, namely, what can Agnon’s texts tell us about names?

Agnon’s literary preoccupations with proper names often line up with the major theoretical issues that concern them: the name as index and as description, the difficulties related to the translation of names, the arbitrariness versus motivation of names, their interpellative potential, and more. Drawing on various disciplines and theoretical dispositions – analytical philosophy of language, post-structuralism, literary theory, and the traditional Jewish corpus – I explore these theoretical issues and examine them vis-à-vis Agnon’s literary texts. Given the name’s unique status, across these disciplines, as a sign whose singularity derives primarily from the nature of its link with its extra-linguistic referent, I propose that asking questions about names is crucial to the

understanding of language and especially its relation with the extra linguistic world, subjects with which Agnon's work is overtly engaged.

In many of Agnon's works, and especially those I discuss in my dissertation, naming and names function as a full-blown thematic and conceptual element. I contend that, more than merely giving his characters 'meaningful', 'interpretable' names, Agnon undertakes an ongoing investigation of proper names and the questions and problems they breed. Within his literary world, names are by no means signifiers whose sole purpose is to point to those who bear them, or at most, also to describe them. Names act: they transform and engender transformation; they operate in the fictive world, and their operation often turns out to be deeply consequential. Acts of naming occur frequently in Agnon's works. Babies are named (and sometimes not-named), and their naming is cause for internal and external conflict. Naming does not end with the single initial act whose subject is a newborn baby. Names constantly change, they are forgotten, supplemented by nicknames, substituted by other names. In Agnon's fiction, names are often encountered at moments of extreme failure or distortion, and the radical effect of the name on its bearer cannot be revoked. Names can change lives – for better or worse, although Agnon chooses mostly to contemplate the latter. In Agnon's literary world, they are ultimately a site of catastrophe.

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# Introduction

## 1.

In 1966, upon winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, S.Y. Agnon appealed to the Israeli Minister of Internal Affairs to prohibit anyone but himself and his family from using the name Agnon. The minister replied that his authority in the matter was restricted to cases that involved potential public deception, and ordered his ministry to disallow the use of the name Agnon by people who practice literature. He added that he found only 12 families in Israel that go by the name. The author was not satisfied with this answer and the matter continued to concern him.<sup>1</sup> In a story titled "Change of Name" ("*Shinuy hashem*") Agnon wrote: "Here in the Land of Israel where they adopt the British custom on several issues, any man can change his name even twice a month [...]. Even the lowest of the low can take a name like that of the country's greatest men. And even I have had the privilege of certain nameless people taking my name for themselves as if, God forbid, they were my relatives".<sup>2</sup>

S.Y. Agnon, among the most (and some would say the single most) prominent and influential authors of Modern Hebrew literature, was born in 1887 in Buczacz, Eastern Galicia (now

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<sup>1</sup> See Dov Rozen, *Be'ohalei Shem* (Jerusalem, 1982), 165-66.

<sup>2</sup> S.Y. Agnon, *Ir umelo'a* [A City in Its Fullness] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1999), 688. Agnon persistently sought out those who named themselves Agnon, even pressing charges against an engineer from Haifa who assumed the name. In a radio interview he once said: "In my life I never produced any bastards, but my name did produce bastards and I am furious at each and every one. I see it as despoilment, as robbery, and I think that the only thing I ask of the state of Israel is to forbid any man who is not my son or grandson from being called Agnon". Elhanan Shiloh, *Hakabbalah beytzirat S.Y. Agnon* [Kabbalah in the Work of S.Y. Agnon] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2011), 81.

Ukraine), under the name Shmuel Yosef Tchatchkes. In 1908, after immigrating to Palestine, he adopted the pen-name Agnon, borrowed from the title of the first story he published there – “*Agunot*”.<sup>3</sup> At first, he objected to being called by the name Agnon, marking it as an author’s name, which, as Michel Foucault tells us, “is not just a proper name like the rest”,<sup>4</sup> but during the 1920’s he began using it as his name for every purpose.<sup>5</sup> As for his given name, Shmuel Yosef, he is called to this day by the acronym S.Y., pronounced Shai. In Agnon’s mature work (starting approximately from the late 1930s) he embedded his name back into the work, and it appeared in various forms – acronyms, anagrams, and even directly – in many of his texts.

In an autobiographical text entitled “Book Matters”, writing of the beginning of his literary path, Agnon recounts that, at 12 years of age, “it occurred to me to write down the names of all the authors since the biblical Abraham and onward. Abraham, because *The Book of Creation (Sefer yetzira)* is ascribed to him. However, I have already been destined to be a teller of stories and not a writer of lists”.<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that the names of authors Agnon had intended to write down are mentioned in conjunction with *The Book of Creation*, the first text of Jewish mysticism, which

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<sup>3</sup> *Agunot*, the plural form of *agunah*, is a term that indicates an abandoned wife who cannot obtain a divorce, usually as a result of the disappearance (intentional or not) of her husband. For a more elaborate discussion of the concept, see chapter 1 on Agnon’s “And The Crooked Shall Be Made Straight”, in which the female protagonist, Kreindel Tcharney, becomes an *agunah*. “Agunot” first appeared in 1908 in the third issue of the periodical *Ha’omer*, where Agnon was employed in the first months after his arrival in Palestine.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author”, in *Textual Strategies, Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harari (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 146.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 4. Nearly all the topics and references mentioned in the introduction are treated in more detail in the chapters themselves. In the introduction, I hereafter refrain from referencing these later discussions.

<sup>6</sup> Agnon, *Me’atzmi el atzmi* [From Myself to Me] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 369. The Hebrew verb ‘to tell’ shares the same root (S.P.R) as the noun ‘story’, as well as ‘book’ and ‘author’.

posits the Hebrew alphabet, and especially the letters of God's name, as the source of all creation.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Agnon did not become a writer of name-lists but a great author of literary fiction. Yet his passion for names never waned.

Agnon's preoccupation with overtly linguistic issues has been the subject of a growing pool of studies. Whereas the first generations of Agnon scholars tended to characterize and analyze his unique, multi-layered Hebrew,<sup>8</sup> contemporary scholars began to study Agnon's perception of language as it emanates from his fiction and non-fictional texts.<sup>9</sup> To put it simply, in recent years scholars have acknowledged the fact that Agnon wrote not only with (his extraordinary, renowned) language but also about it.

One fundamental linguistic question that emerges from his work concerns the relation between word and thing/object/referent,<sup>10</sup> and it is with respect to this question that proper names take on a prominent and sui generis status. The name, in ways that I discuss below, is not just one linguistic sign among many. Across various disciplines and theoretical dispositions, the name is

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<sup>7</sup> Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala", *Diogenes* 20 (1972), 72.

<sup>8</sup> See the section "The Language of S.Y. Agnon" in Yona David's bibliographical book on Agnon. Agnon's Hebrew is so unique that the term "Agnonic Hebrew" (*ivrit Agnonit*) is employed to this day. Yona David, *Sfrarim uma'amarim al S.Y. Agnon veytzivotav* [Books and Articles on S.Y. Agnon and his work] (Jerusalem: Tamir, 1972), 87-90.

<sup>9</sup> See Anne Golomb-Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S.Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Yaniv Hagbi, *Language, Absence, Play; Judaism and Superstructuralism in the Poetics of S.Y. Agnon* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009); Todd Hasak-Lowy, "A Mad Dog's Attack on Secularized Hebrew: Rethinking Agnon's *Temol shilshom*", *Prooftext* 24 (2004): 167-98.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Dan Miron's reading of *Only Yesterday*, in which he posits the question of the relation between word and thing as one of the key themes of this intricate novel. Dan Miron, "Mimashal lesipur toladi, ptichah lediyun beTmol shilshom" [From Parable to Genealogy, An Opening to a Discussion of *Only Yesterday*], in *Kovetz Agnon* [Agnon Miscellany], ed. Emunah Yaron et al, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994), 87-159.

thought of as a unique and often privileged sign whose singularity derives primarily from the nature of its link with its extra-linguistic referent.

Agnon scholars have addressed the subject of proper names almost exclusively through the practice of offering symbolic interpretations for the names of his fictional characters, perceiving fictional names as a figurative apparatus employed by the author in order to characterize his protagonists, to convey to his readers information about the characters, such as their traits or allegorical function. It is a mode of reading that proceeds from and continues the traditional Jewish practice of name interpretation – *midrash shem* – which consists in commentary on the motivation that links a particular name to its bearer. Biblical name interpretations, whether performed within the biblical text itself or outside of it, for instance by *Hazal*, usually explain names either as indicating the nature and deeds of their bearers, or as marking future events.<sup>11</sup>

However, in many of Agnon's stories and in all his novels, naming and names function as a full-blown thematic and conceptual element. Agnon does much more than give his characters 'meaningful', 'interpretable' names. Indeed, there is a sense in which his work can be read as an ongoing investigation of proper names and the questions and problems they breed. In Agnon's literary world, names are by no means signifiers whose sole purpose is to point to those who bear them, or at most, also to describe them. Names act: they transform and engender transformation; they operate in the fictive world, and their operation often turns out to be deeply consequential. Acts of naming occur frequently in Agnon's works. Babies are named (and sometimes not-named),

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<sup>11</sup> See Yehiel Nehari, "Midrahsei shemot mikrai'im bemidrashei hazal: Habehina haleshonit" [The Sages' Approach to Onomastic Midrashim: The Linguistic Aspect], in *These Are the Names*, vol. 2, ed. Aaron Demsky (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999), 31-50 (Hebrew section).

and their naming is cause for internal and external conflict. Naming does not end with the single initial act whose subject is a newborn baby. Names constantly change, they are forgotten, supplemented by nicknames, substituted by other names. In Agnon's fiction, names are often encountered at moments of extreme failure or distortion – a chain of mistakes instigated by the same name designating two different people, a name that passes from its legitimate bearer to someone else with tragic consequences, a name given unrightfully. In all these cases, the radical effect of the name on its bearer cannot be revoked.

In what follows I sketch the outline of a theoretical framework for the analysis of proper names, which will serve as a foundation of sorts for my subsequent readings in Agnon's fiction. This theoretical foundation is highly heterogeneous and multidisciplinary in nature. As Klaas Willems writes: "Proper names are complex signs with specific linguistic, pragmatic, logical, philosophical, semiotic, historical, psychological, social and juridical properties, and hence represent a vast interdisciplinary field of study".<sup>12</sup> I do not, of course, presume or intend to exhaust any theoretical field or issue regarding proper names in the present work, whose main objective is an original interpretation of literature and not a novel theory of names.

Proper names, I wish to show, constitute an underexplored and highly fruitful prism through which to read literature in general, Hebrew literature in particular and specifically Agnon's fiction. This study consists of a series of readings in several of Agnon's major and most interpreted texts, all

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<sup>12</sup> Klaas Willems, "Form, Meaning and Reference in Natural Language: A Phenomenological Account of Proper Names", *Onoma* 35 (2000): 86.

considered milestones of Modern Hebrew literature. Reading these works through the lens of proper names exposes facets of the texts that were largely invisible to earlier readers, and yields a new understanding of them. In this sense, the primary question of the present study is, what can names tell us about Agnon's texts? A secondary question also emanates from my reading, namely, what can Agnon's texts tell us about names? Agnon's preoccupations often line up with the major theoretical issues concerning proper names: the name as index and as description, the translation of names, the arbitrariness versus motivation of names, the interpellative potential of names, and more. And though he does not develop a full-fledged theory of proper names, his Agnon's work may indeed contribute to our understanding of proper names, offering us a unique way of thinking about them that does not simply illustrate or confirm philosophical or theoretical notions.

## 2.

Most surveys of the analytical philosophical treatment of proper names posit as their starting point John Stuart Mill's famous assertion that "[p]roper names are not connotative: they denote the individuals who are called by them; but they do not indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals".<sup>13</sup> Mill famously offered the example of the city of Dartmouth, which was named after the mouth of the river Dart, yet whose name, Mill argued, would likely not be changed even if an earthquake altered the river's course, distancing it from the town. This led him to characterize a name as "utterly unmeaning" – "showing what thing it is we are talking about but not telling

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<sup>13</sup> John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic* (London: Longmans, 1872), 33.

anything about it”.<sup>14</sup> From this point onward, an active argument has persisted about the way in which proper names work: do they only denote or also connote, or in nearly parallel terms, do they have only reference or also sense, extension or also intention.

Before delving into the debate itself it is worth considering why it is that proper names assume such a central role in the philosophy of language. The answer has to do with the ‘classic’ or ‘traditional’ conception of language, described thus by Ludwig Wittgenstein: “The individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. – In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands”.<sup>15</sup> Within this “picture of the essence of human language”, as Wittgenstein puts it, proper names are regarded as privileged words, which encapsulate this essence. They are the most convenient category for such a representational theory of language, since naming, as Gérard Genette writes in his reading of Plato’s *Cratylus*, may be just one part of language “[b]ut it is evidently no accident that this part is constantly taken for the whole: for Socrates [...] naming is really the linguistic act par excellence”.<sup>16</sup> Anat Matar, commenting on the unique linguistic status of names in the history of western philosophy, writes that names are

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), #1. Wittgenstein is quoting Augustine’s *Confessions*.

<sup>16</sup> Gérard Genette, *Mimologics*, trans. Thais E. Morgan (Lincoln and London: University of Nabraska, 1995), 11.

“superior to concept terms, as representing the essence of language in its purity: directly capturing presence”.<sup>17</sup>

At the turn of the century, Gottlob Frege, the father of the ‘linguistic turn’, suggested that, contrary to Mill’s assertion, proper names do have sense (*sinn*) as well as reference (*bedeutung*). Frege begins his argument with an analysis of identity sentences of the form “The morning star is the evening star”, and notices that while both terms refer to the same star – Venus – the sentence is nonetheless informative in a way that “The morning star is the morning star” is not, because “the morning star” and “the evening star” do not have the same sense – hence their sense differs from their reference.<sup>18</sup> Frege’s “sense” is an enigmatic term that has yielded a plethora of studies and interpretations. Willy Van Langendonck, for instance, suggests a possible trajectory of the term’s evolution according to which Frege’s sense was at first somewhat similar to lexical meaning and later came closer to associative meaning.<sup>19</sup>

Following Frege, Bertrand Russell considers proper names to be ‘truncated’ descriptions. However, for Russell, proper names in their ordinary sense are not ‘real’ or ‘logical’ proper names, for which he demands direct acquaintance, an encounter with the name bearer. “When you are acquainted with that particular, you have a full, adequate and complete understanding of the

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<sup>17</sup> Anat Matar, *Modernity and the Language of Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 76; 90. My own review is assisted by Matar’s discussion of proper names, as well as by Willy Van Langendonck’s *Theory and Typology of Proper Names*. Willy Van Langendonck, *Theory and Typology of Proper Names* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, *The Philosophical Review*, 57, 3 (1948): 209-212.

<sup>19</sup> Van Langendonck, *Theory and Typology*, 27-28.



name, and no further information is required”.<sup>20</sup> In this way, as Matar shows, language is securely built upon a basic category of names whose senses coincide exactly with the referents for which they stand.<sup>21</sup> As for proper names in their ordinary sense (“names that we commonly use”), such as Socrates, while they were originally intended to fulfill the function of standing in for particulars, once direct acquaintance is no longer possible they become, according to Russell, “abbreviations for descriptions”. The word Socrates is not a name but a description, which may be rendered by such phrases as “Plato’s teacher” or “the philosopher who drank the hemlock”.<sup>22</sup>

Wittgenstein, or at least the so-called later Wittgenstein (an intriguing proper name / description in itself), explicitly articulates a conception of names that resembles the ‘open’ and ‘versatile’ version of Frege’s sense: “Has the name ‘Moses’ got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases? – Is it not the case that I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readiness, and I am ready to lean on one if the other should be taken from under me and vice versa?”<sup>23</sup>

John R. Searle addresses the theoretical difficulty that stems from the name’s association with various and changing descriptions, and proposes an understanding of the name as a peg on which descriptions hang. Names would become superfluous if they were just the logical equivalents

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<sup>20</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956), 202. Ultimately, for Russell, the only real or logical proper names are the deictics “I”, “this”, and “that”. According to Van Langendonck, this suggests that Russell first supported Mill’s theory that proper names only denote, only later coming closer to Frege’s position on names.

<sup>21</sup> Matar, *Modernity and the Language*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> Russell, *Logic and Knowledge*, 524.

<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, # 79.

for a precise set of descriptions. The function of proper names, Searle writes, is “obviously, to refer to individuals”, and the reason we cannot use descriptions in their stead is that descriptions would force us to specify identity conditions every time reference is made. Names, Searle concludes, are used not to describe or specify characteristics of objects but to refer; however, they do so by being logically connected with characteristics of the object “in a loose sort of way”.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Searle, Saul A. Kripke presents a sharp turn away from descriptivism and toward a revision of Mill’s views, introducing two seminal concepts: the causal chain of reference, and the rigid designator. The former captures the notion that a name designates its bearer (regardless of whether the bearer is dead or alive, known or unknown to the user of the name) in virtue not of the various descriptions but of a causal chain of reference that begins with an “initial baptism”, an act of name giving that fixes the reference through ostension and/or description and after which it “passes from link to link”.<sup>25</sup> Kripke’s fundamental argument against descriptivism is that no single characterization of the referent of a proper name is indispensable to the pertinent use of the name. This notion grounds his novel concept of the name as a rigid designator that designates the same object in any possible world.

Thus the views presented above can be divided roughly into two main categories: Mill and Kripke’s theories of ‘meaningless’ reference, on the one hand, and Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Searle’s ‘descriptivist’ theories on the other. The former adhere to a traditional conception of

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<sup>24</sup> John R. Searle, “Proper Names”, *Mind, New Series*, 67, 266 (1958): 166-173.

<sup>25</sup> Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), 96.

language built upon the foundation of names that refer to an extra linguistic reality and hence are devoid of connotation, or sense; the latter group, consisting of the theories of the 'linguistic turn', move away from the question of reference and instead confine names to a hermetic linguistic sphere. Here names do appear at first as meaningful, yet once analyzed, this meaning is disseminated into various descriptive ingredients, rendering the name no more than an empty 'peg'.<sup>26</sup> As I will argue, the limited function attributed to the name by all the theories mentioned above – as a vehicle for referring or a substitute for a set of descriptions – reflects the fact that they restrict themselves to a narrow set of questions about names, yielding, inevitably, a narrow range of answers.

Yet despite the deep differences among these theories, methodologically at least the analytical debate over proper names does nonetheless form a more or less coherent, unified narrative, with one position either evolving out of the other or else explicitly arguing with it (or both). The same cannot be said of the theoretical (and non-theoretical) notions I consider next. In the first place, most of them cannot be described as full-fledged theories of proper names, and second, they don't systematically refer to each other. Their juxtaposition, therefore, does not yield a coherent successive structure but rather a network of ideas, some more tightly connected than others, that suggests an entirely different understanding of names than the one presented heretofore.<sup>27</sup> As an organizing principle, I will present this next group of ideas about names

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<sup>26</sup> As I discuss in chapters 1 and 2, one fundamental problem with these theories is their untenable (implied) premise that each name is used only once, to refer to one bearer. The fact of multiple bearerhood is perceived by them as posing a methodological difficulty that can be overcome, for example, by treating a single name given to different bearers as a different name – a homonym.

<sup>27</sup> I mention several of these ideas in the introduction, while others are discussed within the chapters themselves.

according to their correspondence with what I regard as the salient limitations or deficiencies of the analytical theories of names.

### 3.

Jacques Derrida's work is strewn throughout with observations about names and naming.<sup>28</sup> For my present purpose, one of Derrida's most salient notions is found in "Des Tours de Babel", where he inspects proper names through the perspective of translation, adding to the analytical dichotomy a third option in which the 'meaningless' and 'descriptivist' alternatives are merged. Proper names, Derrida shows, are exceptional linguistic signs, situated "at the edge of language": they do not properly belong to language, though they make language possible. Analyzing the biblical story of Babel, he shows that the name Babel is at once a proper name and a common noun. Babel "is not only a proper name, the reference of a pure signifier to a single being – and for this reason untranslatable", but also a common noun which can be translated and is "related to the generality of a meaning".<sup>29</sup> Derrida here points to a significant aspect of names that is altogether overlooked by the theories presented in section 2, namely that their meaning consists not only (and sometimes perhaps not at all) in the descriptive sense projected onto them by their respective referent. Babel,

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<sup>28</sup> On Derrida on names and naming, see Gil Anidjar, "Traité de Tous les Noms (What Is Called Naming)", *Epoché* 10, 2 (2006): 287-301.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours De Babel", in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 118; 105.

like many names, is a common noun and its meaning as such is indispensable to its function as name.

In J.L. Austin's influential theory of performative utterances, presented in *How to Do Things with Words*, naming is the second example given for a performative utterance. The performative (or in Austin's later taxonomy, an illocutionary act), in saying something, does something. Austin's entire project is designed to counter the philosophical tradition typified by Frege and Russell, which focuses on or aspires to an ideal language consisting only of logical propositions whose truth values are to be examined. Within this tradition and the philosophical debate that it engendered on proper names, the act of naming, the moment itself, is resonantly missing.<sup>30</sup> But in the 'ordinary' language Austin studies, people do many things with names: they give names to other people (and places, and to some animals), they call each other by names, and in doing so they do much more than simply fix a reference or refer.<sup>31</sup>

In Louis Althusser's account of ideological interpellation, calling someone by their name is in fact practicing the everyday rituals of ideological recognition that guarantee that we are subjects, rituals such as "the fact of calling you by your name, the fact of knowing, even if I do not know what it is, that you 'have' a name of your own, which means that you are recognized as a unique subject" (172).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kripke does address the moment of naming but only insofar as it achieves the fixing of reference, whereas I seek to show that its significance and function are far broader.

<sup>31</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962).

<sup>32</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 172-73.

Judith Butler turns to both Austin and Althusser to explore the injurious, performative, and interpellative power of language, and especially of names, observing that “[t]o be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns”.<sup>33</sup> Butler categorizes injurious naming as an act of illocution, fulfilling an interpellative function. Such an act creates a subject who is not only subordinate to but also participates in the social structure, possibly in subversive ways – a user of language who can now call names and not only be called.

One of the most extreme oppositions to the conception of names (and language in general) as merely a referential vehicle or a means for mediating truth values unfolds in Walter Benjamin’s “On Language as Such and Language of Man”. In this early text, Benjamin reads the biblical scene of creation and naming in Genesis 1 and 2 in order to discover “what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language”.<sup>34</sup> To Benjamin, Man is “the namer”; only when things have been given names by him is God’s creation completed. Human naming acts as a medium of translation between God’s infinite creative word and unspoken, nameless things.<sup>35</sup> Benjamin contrasts the paradisiacal “pure” language of names – the language of “perfect knowledge” of things and “immanent magic” – with the multiplicity of language that follows the fall

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<sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man”, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 67. Benjamin’s text is extremely enigmatic, particularly with respect to the question of how it should be read. Is it an allegory (by one of the most salient theoreticians of allegory)? A biblical exegesis? A linguistic theory? In an intriguing remark from Derrida’s “Des Tours De Babel”, in which he reflects on names and translation and whose latter part is a reading of Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”, Derrida admits that he should in fact be reading “On Language as Such” but “postpones” this reading because of “the overly enigmatic character of that essay, its wealth and its overdeterminations”. Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 111.

<sup>35</sup> Batrice Hanssen, “Language and mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s work”, in *Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. Davis S. Ferris (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 59.

from heaven, the language of communication, of abstraction and judgment. However, even after the fall, man still names his own kind: parents “dedicate their children to God” by naming them, and in naming one’s descendents, “each man is guaranteed his creation by God, and in this sense he is himself creative, as is expressed by mythological wisdom in the idea (which doubtless not infrequently comes true) that a man’s name is his fate”.<sup>36</sup>

The notions of naming as creation and as fate echo mystical ideas about names and naming, but Benjamin himself contrasts his conception of the pure language of names not only with the “Bourgeois view of language”, which erroneously understands the link between sign and object as arbitrary, but equally with mystical linguistic theory, which he views as resting on a misperception of the word as “simply the essence of the thing”. Conversely, in Benjamin’s view, the thing in itself has no word, as it is created from God’s word but named with a human word. Naming is not spontaneous and absolutely unlimited like creation itself, since it depends on how language is communicated to man.

Benjamin’s reading of the biblical naming scene and the reference to mystical linguistic theory brings me closer to the final source of ideas about naming I consider in this survey, which I’ll call, for lack of a better term, the “traditional Jewish corpus”. Agnon’s texts often explicitly refer to or at least echo Jewish naming customs, traditional and mystical Jewish conceptions of names. In Jewish mysticism, language (or more accurately, the Hebrew language) is far more than a conventional tool for communication and information: it is the essence of divine wisdom, from and

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, “On Language as Such”, 69.

with which the world was created, a divine tool and not a human one. Yosef Dan Stresses that the sanctity of language and the infinite meanings concealed in it are not mystical phenomena but a direct and necessary result of the perception that language preceded man and world, and that its essence is Godly.<sup>37</sup> Within this model, the name – primarily God’s name but also the human one – is granted a fundamental role. Gershom Scholem’s “The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala” explores God’s name (The Tetragram) and also purely mystical divine names composed of 12, 42, and 72 letters as the basis of all language and the origin of all creation. An earlier manifestation of this perception is found in *Sefer yetzira*, which outlines the procedures by which God associated the letters of his four-letter name with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, thereby forming the essence of everything created and yet to be created. The entire Torah is seen, already by the early Kabbalists, as the one and only great name of God. Creation is perceived as an act of divine writing: God’s language, and moreover God’s name, penetrates things and leaves them behind as a signature.<sup>38</sup>

Divine names, according to Moshe Idel, permeate most of the literature of Jewish mysticism. Idel Offers a fivefold distinction between the different ways in which Jewish mysticism used and understood the divine names: first, as important components of techniques to achieve mystical experience; second, as an indispensable part of theurgical operations, especially during prayer; third, as powerful and paramount linguistic units used, for example, in amulets and

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<sup>37</sup> As Dan notes, the very possibility of a sacred language other than Hebrew is regarded as an utter absurdity in Jewish context. Yosef Dan, *Al hakdusha: Dat, musar umistika bayahadut uvedatot aherot* [On Sacredness: Religion, Morals, and Mysticism in Judaism and Other Religions] (Jerusalem: Magnes and Hebrew University, 1998), 109-115.

<sup>38</sup> Scholem, “Name of God”. Scholem stresses that it is the Tetragram that “brought about the creation, or rather the creation is closely affixed to the Name – i.e., the creation is contained within its limits by the name”. Ibid, 69.



talismans; fourth, divine names as pointing to the structure of the universe, a type of scientific formula; and fifth, as a basis for hermeneutical approaches that understand the biblical text (or more precisely, a certain texture of it) as consisting of divine names, an interpretation which reveals an esoteric layer of the scripture.<sup>39</sup>

Human proper names also assume a special status within the linguistic perceptions of Jewish mysticism. The name possesses what Scholem calls a “magic quality”, which “relies on the fact that a close and substantial relation exists between the name and the name’s bearer. The name is a real, non-fictitious quantity. It contains a declaration about the nature of its bearer or at least something of the potency attaching to it”.<sup>40</sup>

While such an essentialist view of proper names and their determining capacity finds its most condensed and explicit manifestation in the texts of Jewish mysticism, it is by no means confined to them. Similar ideas, or at least an implicit reflection of them, are found in a wide range of traditional Jewish texts and reflected in various Jewish naming rituals. The notion that *hashem gorem* – literally meaning ‘the name causes’ and better rendered as ‘nomen est omen’ – is a fundamental Jewish concept first appearing in the Babylonian Talmud, in a conversation between Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Elazar, which expresses the idea that names influence the character and determine the destiny and future of their bearers.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, choosing a child’s name is perceived as a matter of great importance: “A man should always examine names before naming

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<sup>39</sup> Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 319-20.

<sup>40</sup> Scholem, “Name of God”, 65.

<sup>41</sup> *Babalyonian Talmud*, seder zera’im, masekhet berakhot, 7b.

his son, who deserves to be righteous, since sometimes the name causes good or causes evil”, says a later *midrash*.<sup>42</sup> From this principal derives a vast matrix of customs and sub-customs practiced (some to this day) in Jewish everyday life.

Jacob Z. Lauterbach’s study of “The Naming of Children in Jewish Folklore, Ritual and Practice” provides an overview of the principal Jewish naming customs from biblical times onward, highlighting the great importance attached in this tradition to the selection of a proper and fitting name for the newly born child. Though the Bible does not provide us with a definite theory of proper names, Lauterbach maintains that from the numerous casual remarks about individual names scattered through it we may gather biblical ideas concerning the significance of personal names.<sup>43</sup> The purpose of a name is to describe adequately the personality of its bearer: marking someone as a distinct individual is accomplished by choosing a name that points to one of his characteristic, or alludes to his origin, the social position into which he was born, the circumstances of his birth, etc. Names can also be prophetic, producing in their bearers those qualities they indicate: “For as his name is, so is he”.<sup>44</sup>

In the Bible, children are nowhere named after their parents or ancestors, since, as Lauterbach explains, the naming of one person after another was taken to imply a transferring of the very being or individuality of the person whose name was passed on, resulting in his ceasing to

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<sup>42</sup> *Midrash Tanhoma*, ha’azinu, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Jacob Z. Lauterbach, “The Naming of Children in Jewish Folklore, Ritual and Practice”, in *Studies in Jewish Law, Custom and Folklore* (Ktav, 1970), 30-74. I summarize these ideas briefly. Lauterbach presents them in detail and substantiates them with biblical references.

<sup>44</sup> Samuel A 25:25.

exist, or in the case of a deceased ancestor, in the annihilation of his memory.

In later periods, this last principle is turned on its head, with the naming of newborns after their deceased ancestors becoming the most fundamental Jewish naming custom. Names now become a distinct apparatus of memory. The transition is discussed in a famous Talmudic dialogue between Rabbi Yose ben Halafta and Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, who contemplate the reasons for the difference between “the first ones” (the former generation), who used to name their children “*leshem hame’ora*” (for the sake of the event) and “we” who name children “*leshem avotenu*” (for the sake of our fathers / ancestors).<sup>45</sup>

The second major revolution in Jewish naming customs occurs much later, at the end of the 18th century, with the compulsory adoption of family names among Ashkenazic Jews. Until that time, the majority of Jews in Germany and Eastern Europe were known by their given name together with their father’s given name – for example, Yitzhak Ben Yaakov. In 1787, Emperor Joseph II ordered the Jews of Galicia and Bucovina to adopt family names.<sup>46</sup> The names were subject to the approval of the local authorities and sometimes imposed by them, turning this mass naming into an interpellative act par excellence – an ideological apparatus transforming individuals into subjects. As Benzion C. Kaganoff notes, the new regulations were designed primarily to serve several practical ends of the concerned governments, but they also constituted “an opportunity to

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<sup>45</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* 37:10. Lauterbach notes that the new practice did not entirely displace the old one but was added to it. Lauterbach, *Studies in Jewish Law*, 40.

<sup>46</sup> Benzion C. Kaganoff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Names and Their History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 20-21. Joseph II’s edict was the first law of its kind in Europe. Similar laws were later passed throughout the continent: in 1807 in Frankfurt, in 1808 in France, in 1812 in Prussia. In Russia the process was initiated with a statute by Czar Alexander in 1904 and finalized in 1845. Among the Sepharadim – the Jews of Spain, Portugal, Italy, and North Africa – most Jews had already adopted family names by the end of the 18th century. Since I am concerned with Agnon’s names, I discuss mostly the Ashkenazi naming customs. *Ibid*, 21-22.

Westernize, 'civilize', and assimilated the Jew". Desirable names, like those deriving from flowers and gems, came with a high price tag, paid to the official in charge of assigning them, and those who could not afford to pay were often given injurious and hostile names such as Schmalz (grease) or Affenkaraut (monkey weed). Wherever Jews were allowed to choose their own names, several general naming methods were used: names were picked according to the tribal lineage of the family (Cohen, Kagan); created as patronym from the father's first name (Mendelson, Abramson), or as a matronym (Rivkin, Malkov); based on the occupation of the bearer (Fleicher, Kramer), or his personality and physical attributes (Kurz, Gross), or place of origin.<sup>47</sup>

Specific naming rituals are examined within the discipline of Jewish onomastics and in certain sociological studies that explore the principles of naming customs as well as the occurrence and frequency of particular names or groups of names in particular communities and periods.<sup>48</sup> While I do occasionally refer to sources of Jewish onomastics in the context of certain naming rituals that appear in Agnon's work, this is not the focus of my reading, which is more theoretical in nature.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 20-30.

<sup>48</sup> A few pivotal works that cannot go unmentioned are: Kaganoff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Names and Their History*; Lawson, Edwin Lawson, *Personal Names and Naming: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987); Alexander Beider, *A Dictionary of Ashkenazic Given Names: Their Origins, Structure, Pronunciation and Migrations* (Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2001); and the five volume Anthology *These Are The Names: Studies in Jewish Onomastics*, ed. Aaron Demsky et. al. (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1997-2011).

#### 4.

One of the difficulties of bringing such a wide range of disciplines into a single discussion about proper names is that these various sources not only offer different answers but ask drastically different questions. Notwithstanding this methodological challenge, I attempt in my readings to draw insights from the side-by-side setting of conceptions and accounts of proper names that do not naturally communicate with one another, yet which display illuminating parallels and no less illuminating differences.

If there is a common denominator to all the theories and non-theoretical notions of names and naming introduced in the previous section (3) it lies in what can be described as the fullness of meaning and the motivation they ascribe to names, as against the emptiness and arbitrariness attributed to them in the philosophical models discussed in section 2. Even Frege, Russell, and Searle, for example, who believe names have a sense, do not regard this sense as inherent to the name. If a name is a peg on which the referent's attributes hang, then there is no significance to the fact that Aristotle bore the name Aristotle and not Johnson, for example. Any name can serve as a peg for any set of descriptions, and in this sense, it is an entirely arbitrary sign.

For Derrida, Althusser, Butler, and certainly in the Jewish corpus I briefly presented, the name itself (independently of its link to a particular referent) is ascribed a certain meaning,<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Analytical discussions of proper names sometimes use the term 'name form' in place of what I call 'the name itself'. 'Yitzhak' and 'Mary' are *name forms*, which can then be given to a particular newborn and become his or her *name*. The distinction between 'name form' and 'name' may seem redundant or over-theoretical, but when discussing the various aspects of the 'meaning' of names, as I do in chapter 2, it is almost indispensable. In this work I usually use the term 'proper name' or 'name', reserving the more formal 'name form' for contexts that necessitate distinguishing it from 'proper name'.

charging it with a determinative and even transformative force that may affect its bearer. Hence, the choice of name, the act of naming which is almost entirely overlooked by philosophers of language, becomes a pivotal moment.

Agnon named himself, turning the title of his first story into a pen name and later an official family name. He also told tales about his name, for instance, when he claimed to have chosen even his given name: in the autobiographical text “A Stool and a Chair”, where he creates a personal mythology by describing his own arrival in the world and the events that preceded it, Agnon writes: “And what name did I choose for myself, the name of the best of judges [...] since Shmuel was the best of judges. And from the love of Zion I added the name Yosef, since Yosef in numerology is Zion. Behold how great is the power of my soul, that I anticipated the very name my father gave me when I was eight days old”.<sup>50</sup>

This story and Agnon’s campaign to protect the exclusivity of his name, recounted at the opening of the introduction, clearly suggest that Agnon’s perception of names is much closer to an understanding of them as meaningful and motivated; names for him are anything but empty or arbitrary. But in order to grasp the complexity and richness of his deliberation on names one needs to turn to his fictional works, Agnon’s true site of naming.

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<sup>50</sup> Agnon, *Lifnin min hahoma* [Within the Wall] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2001), 203.

## Chapter 1: A Man with No Name

### The Referential Crisis in “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight”

#### 1.

“And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight” (“*Vehaya he’akov lemishor*”),<sup>1</sup> Agnon’s first long text, was published in 1912. The novella displays an explicit thematic preoccupation with proper names: unlike some of Agnon’s later texts, in which the name as a theme is assimilated into the narrative and requires interpretation in order to be drawn out, here the theme is overt and central to the plot.

The story tells of Menashe Hayim and his wife Kreindel Tcharney, two small merchants from the Galician town of Buczacz who come upon hard times and gradually lose all their material assets. As a measure of last resort, Menashe Hayim procures a letter of recommendation from the town rabbi and reluctantly sets off to beg for alms among the Jewish communities of Galicia, leaving Kreindel Tcharney behind. The years pass and Menashe Hayim settles into his new existence, until one day a fellow panhandler convinces him to sell him his letter of recommendation. Soon after, the panhandler dies and, as the letter bearing Menashe Hayim's name is discovered in his

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<sup>1</sup> S.Y. Agnon, “Vehaya he’akov lemishor” [And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight], in *Elu ve’elu* [These and Those] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 47-103. The title is borrowed from Isaiah 40:4, which is translated in *The New Revised Standard Version*: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; **the uneven ground shall become level**, and the rough places a plain”. The Hebrew includes no mention of the ‘ground’, leaving the phrase more available for metaphoric uses. All past critical references to the name of Agnon’s novella employed the King James Version, entitling it: “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight”, which I adopt as well. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are from *The New Revised Standard Version*.

belonging, is mistaken for Menashe Hayim. The letter is brought back to the rabbi by witnesses who attest to Menashe Hayim's death, and the rabbi rules that he is indeed dead. Kreindel Tcharney remarries and bears a first child. Returning home, Menashe Hayim discovers what has happened, but as nobody recognizes him, resolves to conceal his identity so as to spare his wife the disgrace of an unlawful marriage and a bastard son. He leaves Buczacz once again and gradually withdraws from life. Shortly before his death, Menashe Hayim reaches the cemetery where the panhandler is buried and tells his story to the cemetery keeper. When he dies, the keeper places the gravestone that Kreindel Tcharney had made in his honor over the right man's grave.

"And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" can rather straightforwardly be said to be about a man who sells his name, parts with it, and pays dearly for this action. He loses his place in the world and eventually also his life. In death, thanks to an amendment made in his last days, he is reunited with his name as the proper gravestone, bearing his true name, is placed upon his grave. In this reading, the "crooked" that becomes straight, the disruption to be resolved, is the disengagement or departure from the name, which carries tragic consequences, while the correction of this disruption, whether successful or not, whether even possible or not, consists in bringing back together the name and its bearer.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> With respect to the treatment of names, "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" displays interesting parallels with *The Bridal Canopy* (1931), Agnon's first novel, of which an early short version appeared in 1919. In the latter, the indigent Rabbi Yudel Nathanson (usually called Rabbi Yudel Hassid) also sets out to beg for alms in order to wed his daughters. When he is mistaken for a wealthy and respectable man of the same name, Rabbi Yudel does not correct the mistake, and his deception, though eventually discovered, leads to the novel's happy, miraculous ending. In both texts the chain of mistakes is set off by the same circumstance – a single name referring to two different people – but whereas "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" recounts a tragedy, *The Bridal Canopy* is a comic text. S.Y. Agnon, *Hakhnasat kalah* [The Bridal Canopy] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998).



Surprisingly, however, the story has rarely been interpreted as a text about losing a name and reuniting with it. The names of the protagonist, Menashe Hayim, and his wife, Kreindel Tcharney, have of course been explicated by many critics mindful of Agnon's tendency to give his characters meaningful names. In this early story his choices are overtly symbolic: 'Menashe Hayim' is he who has forgotten life, or, referring to a slightly different meaning of the same verb, he who leaves life.<sup>3</sup> 'Kreindel Tcharney' is a black head band, an ornament commonly worn by wealthy women in traditional Jewish society. But this is as far as most critics follow the motif of the name within this text. A majority of the readings focus on mapping its textual sources, influences and references.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, and also typical to Agnon criticism, both the text and its protagonist are often interpreted along the axes that lie between tradition and modernity (the latter equated by some with 'literariness'), religion and secularism, faith and heresy.<sup>5</sup> So, for example, Gershon Shaked describes the work as "surprising in its dualism: in its form it resembles Hassidic religious

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<sup>3</sup> Whereas 'Menashe' is a standard Jewish name, passed on from one generation to another, 'Hayim' (meaning 'life') belongs to a group of special names that were given mostly to sickly children as mascots to protect them from the angel of death, and were not passed on in the family. 'Menashe Hayim' is not a common combination like other double names, such as 'Naftali Hertz', for example. Avraham Stahl, *Motza hashemot: Mekoroteyhem vegilguleyhem shel hashemot shelanu* [The Origins of Names: Origins and Evolution of Jewish Names] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2005), 113-15.

<sup>4</sup> The main alleged source was discovered by Avraham Yaari and presented in a short essay published in 1938. Yaari found a pamphlet of 24 pages, titled "Der yored" ["The Fallen" / "The Failure"], by the Yiddish writer Isaac Meir Dick, published in Warsaw in 1855. Dick, maintains Yaari, did not invent stories but translated and adapted old tales culled mainly from Hebrew sources, and in this text as well he was only a "translator and adapter". Yaari asserts categorically that Agnon did not see Dick's pamphlet, but that both men "drew from one source", probably a printed source in Hebrew, which he did not discover. Dick's pamphlet, he argues, can be considered "a kind of source" since he tended to avoid introducing significant alterations to the texts he adapted and instead merely to "translate while making stylistic changes". Yaari summarizes Dick's text and compares it to "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight", emphasizing the latter's literary qualities. Avraham Yaari, "Misipur amami lesipur omanuti – Hakbala le'Vehaya he'akov lemishor" [From a Folklore Story to an Artistic Story], in *Al Vehaya he'akov lemishor, Masot al novella leS.Y. Agnon* [On "And The Crooked Shall Be Made Straight": Essays on Agnon's Novella], ed. Yehuda Friedlander (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1993), 21-27.

<sup>5</sup> See Yehuda Friedlander's introduction to the anthology edited by him in which he analyzes the major trends in the readings of the novella. Yehuda Friedlander, "Befetah hakovetz" [Introduction], in *Al Vehaya*, ed. Friedlander, 7-11.

books, in its content it is one of the most modern works of Hebrew literature written in the Fin de Siècle, between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>6</sup> Referring to earlier interpreters who chided Agnon for creating a pious text whose protagonist is a God fearing man but ending it with an extremely heretical act, Shaked asserts that these critics, whom he characterizes as 'naïve', miss the ironic, even grotesque contrast between the text's religious style and its tragic, demonic plot.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the narrator of the novella presents himself as pietistic through his familiarity with and frequent references to a wide range of Jewish texts, from rabbinical law to Hassidic folktales. Such a narrator is typical of Agnon's early works, like "*Agunot*" and "The Tale of The Scribe" ("*Agadad hasofer*"), which Agnon modelled, as Shaked notes, on the structure of "tales of believers" – traditional religious and moral stories whose central themes are religious faith and the awe of heavenly powers.<sup>8</sup> In addition to adopting certain stylistic characteristics of these traditional texts (especially Hassidic folktales), the narrator repeatedly interrupts his story to invoke some such tale or present a rabbinical debate that seemingly supports his narrative. Moreover, the narrator, whose presence is accentuated in the text through his habits of addressing his readers, commenting on the events he narrates as well as on his procedures of narrating them, stating his hopes regarding the fate of the protagonists, etc., often explicitly expresses his pious viewpoint. So, for

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<sup>6</sup> Gershon Shaked, "Kabtzayn mul sha'ar naul: Al 'Vehaya he'akov lemishor'" [A Beggar before a Locked Gate], *Bikoret ufarshanut*, 35-36 (2002): 73.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 73-74.

<sup>8</sup> Gershon Shaked, "Midrash and Narrative: Agnon's 'Agunot'", in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 286-87.

example, in the first part of the novella, which depicts Menashe Hayim's decline, two stories are recounted about fervent believers who faced great danger only to be saved at the last moment by a miracle thanks to their unconditional belief in God. After one of these digressions, the narrator makes the following entreaty: "Please, my beloved reader, do not be cross with me for leaving Menashe Hayim and his wife and telling of the tax collector's success. God is my witness that I did so only to show you that [...] what happened to the early believers might also happen to the present ones".<sup>9</sup> In fact, however, as Baruch Kurzweil contends, the miracle stories are revealed to be no more than a naïve illusion, manifestly at odds with the "epic reality" of Menashe Hayim, who is not saved by a miracle despite his trust in God. Kurzweil questions the ostensible piousness of the narrator, pointing to an ironic gap between the protagonist's humble acceptance of the fate decreed for him by God, and the narrator's implicit criticism of the divine cruelty.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, the ironic gap may be located 'above the narrator's head', casting him as a "discordant narrator". The term, coined by Dorrit Cohn, marks a category that is distinct from the factually unreliable narrator, instead capturing the reader's sense that "the author intends for his or her work to be understood differently from the way the narrator of the story understands it". The notion of a

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<sup>9</sup> Agnon "Vehaya he'akov lemishor", 54. Throughout this chapter, all quotations from Agnon's novella will appear in parenthesis inside the text. The novella has not been translated into English, and all translations are my own. Page numbers refer to the Hebrew edition.

<sup>10</sup> Baruch Kurzweil, "He'arot le'Vehaya he'akov lemishor" [Comments on 'And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight'], in *Al Vehaya*, ed. Friedlander, 29-37.

discordant narrator suggests a reading that goes against the narrator's discourse, providing the work with meaning that is signaled silently 'behind his back'.<sup>11</sup>

One critic who does address the issue of the disengagement from the name is Israel Rosenzweig. In his Marxist reading he describes the act of selling the letter of recommendation – the letter that bears the name of Menashe Hayim and declares him to be 'himself' – as the selling of the name, but regards this as a minor, meaningless sin wrongly diagnosed by Menashe Hayim as the cause of his punishment. Thus, Rosenzweig acknowledges the fact that the protagonist puts much stress on the selling of the name but disagrees with this internal interpretation. In fact, he argues, the importance of the act of selling the name is that it amounts to giving away Menashe Hayim's humanity for money, and the true tragedy here consists in the protagonist's ignorance of the real reason for his fate, which is capitalism.<sup>12</sup> Hillel Weiss opens his reading of the novella with a chapter about "The motif of 'Name and Remainder' (*shem ushe'erit*) and its place in the work".<sup>13</sup> He argues for the centrality of the question of what "name and remainder" Menashe Hayim will leave behind, pointing out several instances of this phrase in the text, and asks if, upon death, Menashe Hayim

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<sup>11</sup> Dorrit Cohn, "Discordant Narration", *Style* 34 (2000): 307-16. It is not necessary to accept the problematic terminology that contrasts the narrator's understanding with the 'author's intention' in order to adopt this useful term.

<sup>12</sup> Israel Rosenzweig, "Hatluna al hacapitalism o 'Vehaya he'akov lemishor'" [The Complaint against Capitalism Or 'And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight'], in *Al Vehaya*, ed. Friedlander, 39-42.

<sup>13</sup> Hillel Weiss, "Vehaya he'akov lemishor", in *Al Vehaya*, ed. Friedlander, 81-120.

does indeed receive “name and remainder” or whether the end is ironic – but his answer is offered by means that do not involve the name itself.<sup>14</sup>

As for the selling of the letter, insofar as this scene is treated at all it is described by most critics, including Weiss, as the selling of Menashe Hayim’s ‘identity’.<sup>15</sup> But what exactly is this identity and how is it related to the name? My own interpretation of the text questions the automatic equation of these entities by showing that the selling of the letter is explicitly presented within the text as the selling of the *name*, and that Menashe Hayim’s ‘identity’, insofar as one can talk of it, is an unstable, inconsistent, and fragmented construct.

In my reading of this early text, Agnon portrays a name in a moment of what may be described as referential crisis, when it ceases to fulfill its most basic function: pointing to its bearer. From this failure to refer follows an entire set of conceptual questions about the indexical and deictic function of names, their operation as markers of presence and of absence, the descriptive function of names and its relation to their referential role, and the mutability of names. Finally, toward the end of Agnon’s text, the name’s referential role gives way to an entirely different function: the name as carrier of memory.

Four scenes in particular are central to my reading of the story: the writing of the letter by the rabbi; Menashe Hayim’s meeting with the buyer of the letter; the rabbi’s meeting with the

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase “name and remainder” originally appears in Samuel B 14:7. It is spoken by the woman of Tekoa, after Joab “put the words in her mouth” in order to save Absalom from his father’s rage. In the false story she tells King David she is a widow with two sons, one killed by his brother and the other about to be killed by the family in revenge for that murder. “Thus they would quench my one remaining ember, and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth”.

<sup>15</sup> Weiss, “Vehaya he’akov”, 93. See also Shaked, “Kabtzan mul sha’ar”, 90; Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare, A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 87.

witnesses who bring him the letter and his deliberations over whether or not Menashe Hayim is to be considered dead according to rabbinical law; and the closing scene in which Menashe Hayim comes face to face with his own gravestone and, soon after, dies. In all four scenes Menashe Hayim's name plays a crucial role, and in all of them, moreover, a story is recounted, establishing a link between name and story. In the first scene, Menashe Hayim tells his story to the rabbi; in the second, he tells it to the panhandler; in the third, the witnesses tell the rabbi the story of the death; and in the fourth, just before his own death, Menashe Hayim tells his story one last time, to the cemetery keeper.

## 2.

Two proper names are mentioned in the rabbi's letter – Menashe Hayim's at the top, and the rabbi's at the conclusion. These two names charge the text with its operative power. Menashe Hayim approaches the rabbi after realizing that his fall, depicted in great detail in the novella's first chapter, is complete and final, and that all other recourses have failed him. With evident misery and distress he recounts all his misfortunes. The rabbi then reaches for a feather and begins to write "several praises for the important man [who is] in need" (66).

"This man Menashe Hayim Hacoheh", the letter opens, "lived in our town and since his first day here was known as a respectable and dear man whose house was filled with fortune and wealth and upon whom shone the sun of success, but now the wheel of fortune has turned, ten degrees backward it went, and he cannot provide for his house". The rabbi then proceeds to entreat his addressees to give Menashe Hayim charity, and to do so in an honorable manner that will not

disgrace him, promising them that thanks to their good deed God will bestow on them “a blessing and success until their lips will wither from saying ‘enough’” (ibid). Next, the rabbi “signed his name on the text”, indicated the date,<sup>16</sup> “[a]nd to add strength and valor blackened the seal with a burning candle and signed with his mark” (66). The letter consists of four distinct elements. First is the subject of the letter, “This man Menashe Hayim”. While explicit predicates will soon follow, an implicit assertion about the subject, which is crucial to my discussion, is already included in this statement, namely that ‘This man [is] Menashe Hayim’. The second element is a description of the subject, which amounts to a portrait of a man undergoing radical change. Third, the rabbi addresses his readers and asks them to respond to the letter, to take action. And fourth, the rabbi signs the letter and seals it. I will address these elements in reverse order.

The letter ends with a proper name, the rabbi’s, which the text does not reveal, saying only that “The rabbi signed his name on the letter”. This is one of many instances in this and other Agnon works in which names mark a difference, a rupture, or perhaps a portal between the fictional world and the narrative. The rabbi’s name, his signature, which is the condition for the letter’s success, is not allowed into Agnon’s text, and the rabbi remains nameless. He is not the only nameless character in the story; in fact, Menashe Hayim and Kreindel Tcharney are the story’s only characters that receive proper names, while the rest are all named by a description: “the neighbor”, “the panhandler”, the “inn keeper”, “the cemetery keeper”. Excepted from this rule are actual

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<sup>16</sup> To be precise, it is the narrator who indicates the day, week, and year of the rabbi’s signing of the letter, leaving it to the reader to decide whether this date is indeed given in the letter or only ‘outside’ of it, in the literary work. The date is also encoded, with the week, for instance, indicated by the corresponding weekly portion of the *Torah* (*parashat hashavu’a*). According to this and several other references, Yaakov Bahat has calculated the time in which the story takes place, concluding that Menashe Hayim leaves his house in 1858, returns in 1863, and dies approximately one year after. Yaakov Bahat, “Vehaya he’akov lemishor”, in *Al Vehaya*, ed. Friedlander, 43-44.

places and historical figures, which are given their proper (real) names. Even Agnon's hometown, where the story is set, is here called Buczacz, its correct name, and not Shibush – 'distortion' – the name that will appear in many later texts and which is indeed a phonetic distortion of Buczacz.

The purpose of a signature, according to J.L. Austin, is to refer a written utterance back to its origin – to the 'I', the uttering person. To Austin, the signature is a compensation for the lack of the "something which is *at the moment of the uttering being done by the person uttering*". It serves to correct the flaw that in a written text, due to the absence of the person uttering, utterances "are not tethered to their origin in the way spoken ones are".<sup>17</sup> Reading Austin, Jacques Derrida asks about the relation of the signature to the present and to the source (the latter a paraphrase of Austin's 'origin'): "By definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical nonpresence of the signer. But [...] the signature also marks and retains his having-been present in a past *now* [...]"<sup>18</sup>

The rabbi, as already mentioned, not only puts his signature to the letter but also fortifies it with a seal – a signature more concrete and palpable than the written name. But what is it precisely that he needs to sign and seal with such emphasis, what is the tethering, in Austin's words, that needs to be achieved and why do his words require such substantiation?

An explicit answer lies in the letter's third element, namely the rabbi's request of his readers and his promise to them, the contract into which he enters with them. The rabbi's recommendation

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<sup>17</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962), 60-61.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context", in *Limited Inc*, Trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 20.



is what Austin calls a performative utterance. Unlike constative utterances, performatives “do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all”, they “are not ‘true or false’”.<sup>19</sup> In Derrida's paraphrase, a performative utterance “does not describe something that exists outside of language and prior to it. It produces or transforms a situation it effects”.<sup>20</sup> Many performatives are “contractual” utterances, serving primarily to effect some sort of “transaction”.<sup>21</sup> The addressees of the letter – the other party to the contract that the rabbi unilaterally articulates and signs – are absent at the moment of signing. However, their end of the deal seems relatively simple: they're asked to give Menashe Hayim money and to do so honorably, without shaming him. The rabbi's is somewhat more complicated. While the rabbi's promise to his readers that “God will open the windows of heaven and bestow on them a blessing and success until their lips will wither from saying ‘enough’” (66) suggests, strictly speaking, that it is God who will fulfill his end of the contract, still, the rabbi himself retains a certain responsibility. His performative utterance, whose target is to bring the readers to give Menashe Hayim charity, is dependent upon the veracity of an earlier constative utterance: “This man Menashe Hayim lived in [...] was known as [...]”.<sup>22</sup> Whereas constative utterances are either ‘true’ or ‘false’, performative ones can be successful or unsuccessful (‘unhappy’ in Austin's terminology). To describe all that can go wrong with a performative act Austin develops his ‘doctrine of infelicities’. Among the various infelicities he

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<sup>19</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Austin. *How To Do*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> In his discussion of contractual performative utterances Austin likens them to “operatives” or those particular clauses of a legal document which serve to effect the transaction, while “the rest of the document merely ‘recites’ the circumstances in which the transaction is to be effected”. Austin, *How to do*, 7.

specifies, Austin shows that performative utterances often aim to commit a certain participant to a subsequent action, and that in these cases, the success of the utterance requires that the participant in fact intend to act in that way and later actually do so.<sup>23</sup> In the case of the letter, however, the future failure of the text to serve its purpose, its infelicity, is rather an outcome of the falseness of the constative utterance that opens the letter. Indeed, Austin acknowledges the fact that for a performative utterance to be successful “certain statements *have to be true*”, and that “considerations of the type of truth and falsity may infect performatives (or some performatives)”.<sup>24</sup> In this work I argue that the opposite is also true, i.e. that names as performatives infect and affect matters of truth and falsity.

Upon signing the "contract", the rabbi in effect vouches that Menashe Hayim is what and more importantly whom he is said to be. He thus confirms the first two elements of his letter – the statement that “This man [is] Menashe Hayim”, and the man's description. These elements correspond with the two philosophical perceptions of proper names presented in my introduction: the thesis of reference, and the thesis of knowledge or description. The letter first refers, pointing the name to its object directly, and then immediately moves on to describe this referent in detail. Since the letter's future readers will be meeting Menashe Hayim for the first time when the text introduces him to them, his name will mean nothing to them, it will merely be an indexical sign, pointing to the man standing in front of them. The written introduction will be supplemented by the readers' present impression of Menashe Hayim, of his outer appearance and the particular

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 45, 55.

context in which they are encountering him, both of which will suggest that he is a panhandler. And it is this impression that the rabbi's description aims to correct, at least partially. According to the letter, Menashe Hayim deserves charity because he is 'really' or 'originally' a rich and respectable merchant whose fortunes turned sour, and not a panhandler. Hence the description is meant to compete with the knowledge that Menashe Hayim himself will convey ('this is a panhandler') while still serving its performative purpose ('give him charity'). On the face of it, being a merchant (i.e. wealthy and respectable) and being a panhandler are mutually exclusive characteristics. This exclusiveness is manifested by the monetary transaction of charity – a fundamental motif within the story – in which a clear line is drawn between those who give and those who receive.

The process described in the letter is thus of a man who has undergone such a radical transformation that he no longer is himself, indeed he is almost the polar opposite of himself, and it is precisely this paradoxical combination of characteristics that makes him eligible, according to the rabbi, for charity. The question of the behavior and theoretical implications of unstable descriptions constitutes the core of the debate between descriptivist theories of proper names and causal theories of reference. Saul A. Kripke builds his entire case against descriptivism on the argument that no single characterization of the referent of a proper name is indispensable to the pertinent use of the name. This notion grounds his revolutionary concept of the name as a rigid designator that designates the same object in any possible world. Even if Nixon – Kripke's favored example – had not been elected President, he would still be Nixon. The only necessary truth is that Nixon is Nixon, not that he was the President of the US. Similarly, it is only a contingent truth that Aristotle (an even more popular example among philosophers of language) was the teacher of Alexander the

Great, or that he taught at all for that matter, and the same contingency holds true of any other property attributed to him.<sup>25</sup>

Kripke's arguments against descriptivist theories of names are an almost direct reply to John R. Searle, whose attempts to solve many of the same problems from within a descriptivist theory lead him to the idea of a name as a peg on which descriptions are hung. For Searle, the users of the name Aristotle decide, more or less arbitrarily, what constitutes the criteria for 'Aristotle'. It is the very looseness of the criteria for proper names that enables them to refer. Searle writes of the uniqueness and pragmatic convenience of proper names, which lie in the fact that "they enable us to refer publicly to objects without being forced to raise issues and come to agreement on what descriptive characteristics exactly constitute the identity of the object".<sup>26</sup>

Menashe Hayim's name is connected to his characteristics so loosely that it can contain such contradictory qualities as being a beggar and not being a beggar at the same time, and still succeed in referring to Menashe Hayim – or so at least it seems at this point in the story. Using Kripke's terminology we could say that even after Menashe Hayim ceases to be a wealthy merchant, he is still Menashe Hayim. His name can bear any fluctuation of characteristics – it will continue to refer to him properly no matter what fate brings. Roland Barthes describes this feature of the name as its very essence. The proper name is the point of convergence of a plethora of various and even contradicting 'semes'; "What gives the illusion that the sum is supplemented by a precious remainder (something like individuality [...]) is the Proper Name". The name "enables the person to

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<sup>25</sup> Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>26</sup> John R. Searle, "Proper Names", *Mind, New Series*, 67, 266 (1958): 166-173.

exist outside the semes whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely. As soon as the Name exists [...], the semes become predicates, and the Name becomes a subject". In literature, Barthes contends, "what is proper to narrative is not action but the character as Proper Name".<sup>27</sup>

Finally, I arrive at the letter's first element and the most important to my reading: reference and presence. Like any sign, a name is always put, in Derrida's words, "in place of the thing itself": "Signs represent the present in its absence; they take the place of the present. When we cannot take hold of or show the thing [...], then we signify".<sup>28</sup> Derrida writes of the absence of the referent as a possibility that is not only empirical but also constitutive of the mark, adding that "the potential presence of the referent at the moment it is designated does not modify in the slightest the structure of the mark, which implies that the mark can do without the referent".<sup>29</sup>

Still, the name, more than other signs, seems to carry the promise of presence. This is what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls the "the quasi-deictic" nature of the name, or the "as-if-right-here". Deictics, Lyotard shows, are the designators of reality, designating their object "as an extra-linguistic permanence" and relating the instances of the universe "back to a 'current' spatio-temporal origin so named 'I-here-now'".<sup>30</sup> Like deictics, the name is "a pure mark of the designative

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<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 191. The semes mentioned here are a group of nouns that function as predicates, of which Sarrasine is the sum: "turbulence, artistic gift, independence, excess, femininity, ugliness", etc.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Difference", in *Speech and Phenomena, And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 138.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 33. The book's first chapter, titled "The Referent, the Name", is largely dedicated to a reading of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*.

function”, and not the equivalent of a bundle of descriptions. But unlike deictics, the name designates the same thing independently of the phrase in which it is currently situated: “Its rigidity is this invariability”.<sup>31</sup>

Lyotard discusses three types of phrases that involve a proper name: the descriptive (an example from Agnon’s text: ‘Menashe Hayim Hacoheh lived in [...], was known as [...]’), the nominative (‘This man is called Menashe Hayim’), and the ostensive (‘This/Here is Menashe Hayim’). He stresses that “[t]he identity of the referent of these three phrases is not established once and for all. It has to be affirmed ‘each time’”. Names can act as linchpins between ostensive phrases with their deictics, (phrases that consist in direct demonstration, in pointing), and any given phrase. But that they actually do act as such, thereby endowing their referent with reality, remains a contingent fact.<sup>32</sup> The referent of a proper name, which Lyotard calls “the object of history”, is designated by a name that is quasi-deictic but not a deictic.

It is this rather illusive nature of the name that enables and propels the storyline of “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight”. In writing the letter of recommendation the rabbi uses every ostensive device at his disposal to ensure that Menashe Hayim's name adheres to him tenaciously, suggesting that the link between man and name is in fact very fragile, that the two can easily be separated. The rabbi’s signature, his own name inscribed at the bottom of the letter, and the emphatic use of the seal, are meant not only to tether his words to their origin (the rabbi himself), as all signatures do according to Austin; his signature and seal need also, by virtue of their

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 42-43.

authority, to guarantee the link between his words about 'Menashe Hayim' and the man carrying the letter, that is, to underwrite the claim that “this” is indeed Menashe Hayim.

When Menashe Hayim returns home from the rabbi with the letter in hand, Kreindel Tcharney joins the rabbi's effort to substantiate his words. She takes a torn table cloth and “spread[s] the cloth according to the size of the letter, to paste it with good glue so that it would last for many days, for hands tend to grope and she feared that the letter would be spoiled before it serves its purpose” (67). As with the detailed description of the planting of the rabbi's seal, here again the signifier is secured, its materiality enhanced in a desperate effort to secure and enhance the signified. Kreindel Tcharney accurately identifies the letter's future function: to be passed from hand to hand. As it turns out, however, it is to Menashe Hayim himself and not to the table cloth that she should have glued the letter, for it is not the materiality of the letter that proves to be fragile but the letter's link with its owner; not the physical signifier that is in danger but the sign's connection with its referent. A deictic word, “this” can change its meaning according to the context in which it is uttered or read, and context is exactly what the rabbi and Kreindel Tcharney will lose control of once the letter leaves their sight, once writing ends and reading begins.

The rabbi signs the contract in the absence of his addressees knowing that later on, when they hopefully fulfill their end of it, it is he who will be absent. Only the presence of Menashe Hayim is supposed to be maintained consistently, whenever the letter is read, by means of the deictic-ostensive phrase connecting the name to its bearer. Eventually, however, despite the signature and the seal, it is the rabbi's end of the contract that will not be kept, due to the violation of his commitment that ‘this’ is Menashe Hayim.

For Derrida, the fundamental structure of any writing is that it always occurs in the absence of the addressee and later operates in the absence of the sender, an absence “from the mark that he abandons, and which cuts itself off from him and continues to produce effects independently of his presence and of the present actuality of his intentions”.<sup>33</sup>

For a writing to be a writing it must continue to 'act' and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, be it because of a temporary absence, because he is dead, or, more generally, because he has not employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his desire to say what he means in order to sustain what seems to be written 'in his name'.<sup>34</sup>

The “essential iterability” of the written sign, emphasized by Derrida, its “readability” and “citationality” all seem especially essential to the recommendation, which will be successful only if it is read and acted upon over and over again. Menashe Hayim’s future journey is to be a journey of accumulation: financial accumulation which in turn depends upon accumulated readings of the letter that he carries, occurring far away from the producer of the text, far from “total context” and the “transparency of intentions” it affords.<sup>35</sup>

### 3.

“What a good-for-nothing man you are, if I had this letter of recommendation I would earn myself stacks of money, but you, you do nothing with it. And why don’t you? For you are ashamed, and he

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<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 17.



who is ashamed of begging will not meet with any success" (77). With this aggressive but persuasive argument begins the fascinating, subtle negotiation between Menashe Hayim and the panhandler, culminating in the sale of the letter, and the name. Behind the panhandler's mockery and insulting rhetoric lies a bona fide argument: an essential difference exists between himself and Menashe Hayim, he contends, and the letter can and should switch hands not because the two men are similar but because they are opposites. Whereas he himself is a true beggar, capable even, in the right conditions, of thriving in his panhandler's life, Menashe Hayim's shame will never allow him to succeed in his 'new profession'.

As far as the argument from difference goes, Menashe Hayim hardly requires any coaxing. When he meets the panhandler he has already been on the road for several years, during which he gradually and reluctantly became a proficient beggar, wondering from town to town, eating charity meals at the tables of strangers, collecting coins to send to Kreindel Tcharney but spending them anon on basic necessities. The second chapter carefully portrays his sinking into a 'panhandling state of being' involving fewer and fewer characteristics of the old Menashe Hayim, the wealthy, dignified merchant, and more and more of the new one – the wandering beggar. Yet every time the text juxtaposes these seemingly contradictory states Menashe Hayim proves to consist of a peculiar mixture of the two. In the early days of his journey this compound is manifested through a series of misidentifications in which he is taken for a merchant on a business tour or a man visiting his ancestors' graves in the local cemetery. Later, as he gradually takes his place among the beggars, inhabiting the lowest echelon of the social hierarchy, Agnon portrays Menashe Hayim's unique combination of assimilation and distinction, resemblance and difference, a portrayal not devoid of

irony. Thus, Menashe Hayim “found his place in synagogues and seminaries among the poor and the indigents” but “from the way he sat there it was obvious that this was not his place” (74).

All facts to the contrary, then, Menashe Hayim does not perceive himself as a panhandler and never gives up the dream of returning to Kreindel Tcharney and to his previous life. He vows that if God allows him to “return to my home safely and renew my trade and to enjoy the fruits of my commerce” he will give away to the poor more than he ever had before (76). More than just a repayment of God’s favors, this imagined act of giving charity generously rather than begging for it represents one more characteristic of a lost status he wishes to regain. Just before his meeting with the panhandler who will buy the letter, Menashe Hayim contemplates his home, idealizing the existence of ‘true’ beggars who, unlike him, can take pleasure in their state of being: “At that time Menashe Hayim envied even the simplest of beggars, who rejoice in finding a satisfactory meal for *Shabbat*, while he is pained and saddened by the sorrow of his wife, moaning and crying, from whence will come his salvation and return him to her” (77).

These very fantasies are targeted by the panhandler, who coaxes Menashe Hayim to recount his misery and pretends to sympathize. The perceptive man immediately understands the potential that lies in Menashe Hayim’s sense of distinction and proceeds to exploit it in the arguments he offers in favor of selling the recommendation. Agnon artfully depicts the intricate mechanism of persuasion and self persuasion that follows.

The men's meeting opens with Menashe Hayim’s confession, laying before the panhandler all that had happened to him until that day. He is the second of three men to whom this story is revealed by Menashe Hayim, the first being the rabbi and the last – the cemetery keeper. It is at this

point that the panhandler ‘accuses’ Menashe Hayim of being ashamed of begging and not putting the letter to proper use. This assertive opening gambit then gives way to smooth words of empathy that touch Menashe Hayim’s heart – “so far away from home I meet a man who really and truly feels sorry for me” – laying the ground for the next step of persuasion:

Suddenly he held Menashe Hayim’s mantle and said, listen Rabbi Menashe Hayim, any way you wish to leave panhandling behind and return to your home, but you have not come around to it yet. Hear me Rabbi Menashe Hayim, for we are brothers, poor and indigent, sell me the letter today and I will give you whatever you want, and not only that, you will also do me a good deed that will be considered charity. (78)

By now, after the panhandler has heard his story, the "good-for-nothing man" has become "Rabbi Menashe Hayim", the title implying not actual rabbinical authority but a more general erudition and respectability. As he makes his actual bid to buy the letter, the panhandler depicts Menashe Hayim’s state as temporary and reversible, almost accidental. Panhandling is merely a contingent and transitory characteristic, easily revoked, whereas Menashe Hayim's previous existence, to which he can and should go back, is essential and constant. For one brief moment the panhandler allows himself to indicate the similarity between them, appealing to Menashe Hayim’s sense of solidarity with the plea “for we are brothers” — a biblical reference to Abraham's plea to Lot not to quarrel with him — “poor and indigent”.<sup>36</sup> But his very next step is to point out Menashe Hayim’s way out of this unsought brotherhood: the transaction will earn him any sum he asks, and perhaps more importantly, will qualify as an act of charity, thereby restoring him once again to the ‘proper’ bank of the river that runs between those who beg and those who offer.

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<sup>36</sup> Genesis 13:8. He also makes reference to Jacob who persuades Esau to sell him his birthright in Genesis 25:31.

Menashe Hayim heard this and swelled with anger. How can he sell the recommendation letter? For his name is embedded in it and his honor should not be passed to another. Moreover, he might fail others who will trust the recommendation and give to him who is not decent, for who knows his essence and his nature. But that wretched man mocked him and repeated what he said and ridiculed his arguments and his refusal until his counsel reached Menashe Hayim's heart. Menashe Hayim did not know what to do, God forbid if he sells the letter and God forbid if he doesn't. Supposing he sells it, but his name is embedded in it, the man's defamation will follow him and bring upon him shame and disgrace and contempt and demotion, for who knows the nature of this man. Supposing he does not sell, but with the money he gets he will be able to return home and Kreindel Tcharney will starve no more and he will no longer wander the world. (78)

Menashe Hayim's path from total refusal to submission passes through three distinct stages. The fundamental argument for not selling the recommendation is obvious to him from the start and he indeed repeats it twice: *his name is embedded in the letter*. The rabbi's and Kreindel Tcharney's efforts were successful insofar as the name is safely inserted into the letter and cannot be removed – as Menashe Hayim now may well have wished to do. Selling the letter without the name would pose no problem; hence, it is not the letter per se but the name inscribed in it that Menashe Hayim knows so clearly he should not pass on.

But why not? At first, the reason given is the difference between himself and the panhandler. Whereas he himself is honorable and decent, the nature of the man before him is at best 'unknown' and more likely, given his offer to buy the letter, indecent. For Menashe Hayim, his name is the equivalent of his honor, and both "should not be passed to another". Far from Searle's looseness that allows for names to contain heterogeneous and variable characteristics, to accumulate different senses and also dispose of them according to circumstances, Menashe Hayim's perception of his own name is hermetic, static, and unequivocal: it signifies a certain facet of him, the only one he acknowledges as valid.

At this stage, it is the deception that would result from selling the letter that troubles him, the possibility that on the basis of the recommendation, which would be a false one, its readers might unwittingly give to an indecent man. His concern is not simply that they would be giving charity to the wrong man – to someone who is not ‘Menashe Hayim’ – but that they would be giving to a man who is not of the right nature. In this scenario, the name still bears the ‘sense’ of the right Menashe Hayim (decency, respectability), while referring to the wrong one.

In the second stage, after the panhandler mocks him and ridicules his argument, Menashe Hayim’s adamant objection gives way to ambivalence: he now weighs the two options, selling and not selling, both of which are presented in his mind as equally bad choices. The contrast between himself and the panhandler, which had governed his first objection, is now replaced, or at least supplemented by, another contrast situated at an entirely different level. The same argument against selling is once again stated here – the fact that his name is embedded in the letter – but now, as he contemplates the future results of this fact, it is no longer just the deception of others that worries him: “his name is embedded in it, the man’s defamation will follow him, and bring upon him shame and disgrace [...]”. This is an altogether different sort of flaw than the moral one he had envisioned earlier. Menashe Hayim realizes that once the panhandler is allowed to use his name he will affect this name. The name will not remain static, simply signifying his ‘honor’ as he had assumed before, but instead will change its sense according to the man who bears it. In the long run, the disruption will consist not in the fact that the name will mean ‘honorable’ while falsely referring to a dishonorable man, but in the fact that the name will *come to mean* ‘dishonorable’. Thus Menashe Hayim refines his notion of how the name works, acknowledging its cumulative nature, its mutability and potential for heterogeneity.

But straight away he makes another crucial mistake. Now he unfolds the argument against not selling, which is articulated as an argument in favor of selling: with the money he earns from selling the letter he will return home and Kreindel Tcharney will starve no more. Hence the name, which to him stands for honor and respectability, is pit against its bearer's actual life circumstances. According to Menashe Hayim's analysis, he faces a choice between his name and his existence, suddenly casting the name and the bearer, the sign and the referent, in a surprising opposition. As Menashe Hayim perceives the situation, at present his existence is disrupted while his name remains intact, and it is within his power to reverse this order: to sell his name, thereby impairing it, and in return retrieve his previous life. The imagined tradeoff and the segregation it assumes between 'name' and 'existence' contains a strong element of mobility and immobility. Although he "wander[s] the world" with the letter indicating his name, Menashe Hayim seems to think, as I have suggested, that his name has remained immobile through all this travel, almost as though he had left it behind in his hometown. In this sense, he believes, he has already parted with his name, whereas now he wishes simply to invert the structure of their separation: he himself will return to his home and regain everything he had relinquished, while the name will set out on a journey that will likely tarnish it. In this analysis lies Menashe Hayim's most fatal mistake: first, because until this moment he has not in fact parted from his name, and second, because the distinction between his existence and his name is a false one. There will be no 'actual life', no life at all for that matter, for Menashe Hayim without his name; in the most concrete manner, there is no such thing as 'Menashe Hayim' without his name.

Thus, Menashe Hayim is already contemplating a terrible, if false, dilemma when the panhandler, again applying his perceptive intuition, produces the final bait: "Perhaps you are

worried about the honor of your name, but you are not alone in the world, there are many Menashe Hayims” (78). To prove that there is no harm in selling the letter, the panhandler exploits one of the most difficult and unresolved issues relating to proper names: the problem of names with multiple bearers. In their purest form, proper names should each refer to a single object in the world, and most theoretical arguments treat them as if they do so.<sup>37</sup>

But the reality is more complex: as Jerrold J. Katz indicates, most proper names refer to multiple objects in the world (there are many Menashe Hayims), whereas the tokens of these names (particular instances of the name 'Menashe Hayim') have unique reference (each picking out a distinct object in the world).<sup>38</sup> Descriptivist theories, which treat proper names as if they were common nouns, attempt to reconcile multiple bearerhood with unique reference by suggesting that proper names are ambiguous. As Katz argues, however, proper names are not ambiguous but rather referentially equivocal, having multiple bearers, not multiple senses. Causal theories of reference also encounter problems with multiple bearerhood: since the sound and orthography of 'Menashe Hayim', for example, is the same from one Menashe Hayim to another, 'Menashe Hayim' does not serve as a distinguishing mark among these many bearers. Kripke, in an effort to explain how one Menashe Hayim is somehow a different mark from that of another, proposes to adopt a terminology “according to which uses of phonetically the same sounds to name distinct objects

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<sup>37</sup> Lyotard asserts, for example, that a name is “merely an index which, in the case of the anthroponym, for example, designates one and only one human being”. Lyotard, *Differend*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Jerrold J. Katz, “The End of Millianism: Multiple Bearers, Improper Names, and Compositional Meaning”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 98, 3 (2001), 137-166. Katz discusses some of the theoretical questions relating to these two seemingly contradictory facts.

count as distinct names”, analogously to calling homonyms distinct ‘words’.<sup>39</sup> But this, shows Katz, is patently false. Unlike homonyms such as ‘bear’ and ‘bare’, and even ‘bank’ and ‘bank’, which differ in etymology, orthography (often), syntax (sometimes), and meaning (always), Kripke's distinct names, such as ‘Menashe’ used to name two individuals, do not differ in these categories since both words, being names, are supposed to have no meaning at all.

Thus, whereas descriptivists proliferate senses for referentially equivocal names, Kripke proliferates names themselves.<sup>40</sup> However, “[n]ames are not like the numbers assigned to prisoners”, Katz contends, “[n]either for proper nouns nor for their tokens is there a phonologically or orthographically distinct name for each individual bearing the name. Nor are names ambiguous like common nouns”. He therefore concludes: "Multiple bearerhood contradicts both Kripke's proposal and the classical description theory".<sup>41</sup>

In light of this discussion, the panhandler’s remark that there are many Menashe Hayims can be seen to have several potential implications. First, it suggests that Menashe Hayim’s name is a useless mark, since the referential function of names in general, given multiple bearerhood, is essentially flawed. This suggestion is, for reasons discussed above, theoretically plausible, yet its application to the case at hand is false or misleading at best considering that the rabbi’s letter specifies also the family name (Hacohen) and Menashe Hayim's place of residence, thereby solving or at least considerably diminishing the

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<sup>39</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Katz, “End of Millianism”, 148-50.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 153.



problem of multiple bearerhood. Menashe Hayim probably knows what the rabbi later states for a fact, that there is “no other man with this name in all the counties” (92), but he allows himself a moment of self-deception when he succumbs to the panhandler’s theoretically valid argument.

The panhandler's remark also suggests that Menashe Hayim will not quite be selling his name or parting with it but merely adding one more Menashe Hayim to the large inventory that already exists. Menashe Hayim will not remain nameless, he will still just be one among many of his type, and if there are already many Menashe Hayims, what does it matter if there is one more? Moreover, since there are many tokens of the same type, the meaning of the name Menashe Hayim is not restricted to one man’s honor. Each bearer broadens the name's meaning with his own characteristics until the name becomes so diverse and inconsistent as to be nearly, or arguably fully, meaningless; signifying anything and everything, it therefore signifies nothing at all.

The coy logic of the panhandler’s argument from multiple bearerhood finally succeeds in breaking the hermetic connection that Menashe Hayim had perceived between his name and his honor. As a result, he can now altogether set aside the consideration of the name and act solely on the assumption that selling the letter will allow him to return to his previous life.

Once the two men part ways and Menashe Hayim is left with money and without the letter, he decides to make a stop on his way home at the Lashkovits fair, where he plans to resume his business and return to Kreindel Tcharney as a successful merchant. The visit at the fair, described by Agnon as an infernal carnival, has received much interpretative attention. At its conclusion, after a night of gluttony and inebriation at the local inn, Menashe Hayim finds himself lying in the dirt outside the inn, bereft of his money and phylacteries. As he treads through the muddy, deserted

fairgrounds, stumbling over debris, the heavy rain falling upon him, it seems that the 'crooked' has reached its climax. But in fact, one further downward spiral awaits him, the final break from his name.

#### 4.

"And now let us leave Menashe Hayim for a moment [...]", opens the third chapter, "and follow the panhandler who bought the recommendation and see what his actions will be. Lo and behold, what happened to Menashe Hayim happened also to the panhandler" (88). The second chapter, which began with Menashe Hayim taking to the road, ends with his heading back home. After leaving the fair, destitute and despaired, he returns to begging and succeeds, little by little, to collect enough money to return to Kreindel Tcharney. Agnon concludes the second chapter with a quotation from Psalms: "Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth".<sup>42</sup>

The statement that what happened to Menashe Hayim happened to the panhandler seems to suggest some kind of causal relation between the two fates, or at the very least implies their chronological order. But what is the nature of this relation? Does Agnon imply that *nomen est omen*? *Hashem gorem*, literally 'the name causes', is a fundamental Jewish concept implying a causal relation between name and bearer. From this basic idea – that a name determines one's fate or at least participates in its determination – derives a vast matrix of customs and sub-customs: whom a child should and shouldn't be named after; what names are to be avoided under all

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<sup>42</sup> Psalms 46:9 in the Hebrew text, 8 in the English translation.

circumstances; when a name needs to be changed; when it is advisable not to name a child upon birth; etc.<sup>43</sup> Agnon puts the words *hashem gorem* in Kreindel Tcharney's mouth later on in the third chapter, when, remarried and with child, she considers naming her son after the 'deceased' Menashe Hayim. "But she changed her mind, since Kreindel Tcharney was terrified that perhaps *hashem gorem*, perhaps she would draw Menashe Hayim's luck onto the child, hence she put an end to that thought, and took a vow: if God be with me, I will put up a headstone on his grave" (94).

The phrase '*hashem gorem*' first appears in the Babylonian Talmud, in a conversation between Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Elazar. An earlier reference from the Jerusalem Talmud maintains that "sometimes the change of name causes, and sometime the change of place causes". But the idea introduced in the Babylonian Talmud is sweeping: it does not relate only to specific cases in which a name is changed but asserts that the name, any name, may determine the destiny and character of its bearer.<sup>44</sup> According to Shamma Yehuda Friedman, this seemingly minor shift significantly alters the common concept of the Talmudic name interpretation (*midrash shem*).<sup>45</sup> Thus, the biblical Ruth, who is the subject of Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Elazar's conversation, was not so named because she was about to see her mother in law's words, or because of her future

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<sup>43</sup> Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Studies in Jewish Law, Custom and Folklore* (Ktav, 1970), 41-55.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 41-42.

<sup>45</sup> Shamma Yehuda Friedman, "Hashem gorem: Divrei hahaham noflim al shmo" [Nomen est Omen – Dicta of Talmudic Sages which Echo the Author's Name], in *These are the Names, Studies in Jewish Onomastics*, vol. 2, ed. Aaron Demsky, (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press 1997), 51; *Jerusalem Talmud*, seder mo'ed, masekhet sahabat 6:9; *Babylonian Talmud*, seder zera'im, masekhet berakhot 7b.

offspring David.<sup>46</sup> The common Talmudic name interpretation would suggest such directionality, showing that a person was named after some quality or some event (future or past) in her biography. Instead, it is the name itself that is here said to cause the future result.<sup>47</sup> Rabbi Elazar summarizes their conversation by quoting the same verse from Psalms cited by Agnon (“Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth”), adding: “don’t read desolations (*shamot*) but names (*shemot*)”, the pun based on the similarity in spelling and pronunciation between the two words. In other words, God brought names on the earth and these names are what have subsequently caused desolations and other effects.

So it is with reference to this verse from psalms that Agnon directly prefaces his assertion that what happened to Menashe Hayim happened to the panhandler. The claim is puzzling insofar as it is not, at least at this point, accurate. Whereas the former wakes up from his night of gluttony and inebriation penniless but alive, the latter drinks heavily for a couple of days and finally walks drunk under the burning sun to a seminary (*beit midrash*) where he lies down on a bench and

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<sup>46</sup> In both cases the name Ruth shows a certain phonetic similarity to these future effects. Aaron Demsky, who writes about “Names and No-Names in Ruth”, asserts that her name, which defies any straightforward interpretation, probably derived from the root R.W.Y, “to satiate”, “to quench one’s thirst”. Aaron Demsky, “Names and No-Names in Ruth”, in *These are the Names, Studies in Jewish Onomastics*, vol. 1, ed. Aaron Demsky, Joseph A. Reif and Joseph Tabory (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1997), 30.

<sup>47</sup> See also Mieke Bal’s reading of the biblical story of Ruth, in which she analyzes the proper names of the characters and arrives at a very similar understanding of their function. Orpah’s name, which means ‘back’ or ‘neck’, is explained by *Midrash Rabbah* as “the one who turns her back”. However, as Bal notes, “receiving the name, the little girl was not yet ‘the one who turns the neck’ but she was already defined as such. She is subjected to her name, determined by it”. Unlike Orpah, Naomi – ‘the sweet one’ whose grief has made her bitter, chooses for herself a new and more suitable name: Mara – ‘the bitter one’. But eventually “[h]istory corrects the character who had not enough faith in her name”, and Naomi indeed becomes ‘the sweet’. Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Reading of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 73-77.

dies.<sup>48</sup> Nor does the inaccuracy end here. Toward the end of the novella, the cemetery keeper, suspecting that Menashe Hayim is actually the man whose gravestone he is making, tells him that “A few days ago a woman came to me, dressed like a noble woman, and asked to see the grave of that beggar who was found in the seminary several years ago, **a few days before the Lashkovits fair**, with a recommendation in his pocket from the rabbi of Buczacz” (101).<sup>49</sup> Thus, chronologically speaking, it was the panhandler who died first, days before Menashe Hayim lost his money and dignity at the Lashkovits fair.<sup>50</sup> The point is not, of course, that the fabula differs from the syuzhet – that the fictional events do not unfold in a chronological order – but rather that what happened to the panhandler happened also to Menashe Hayim, and not the other way around, as the narrator declares. This reversed chronology, I contend, suggests a reversed causality, in which, contrary to the narrator's claim, the fate of the ‘pseudo’ Menashe Hayim, the panhandler who bears the name, determines the fate of the ‘real’ one, who is nameless.

Alongside the chronological decision of whose tale to tell first, the splitting of the story into two parallel narratives necessitates another textual choice, namely how to call each character. As Menashe Hayim's and panhandler's paths diverge, a semiotic disruption occurs. The name, the index ‘Menashe Hayim’, is being used by the wrong man and is now pointing at him, while Menashe Hayim remains nameless. He may still think of himself as bearing his name, but the official documentation that declared him to be ‘himself’ and introduced him to strangers is no longer his.

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<sup>48</sup> Uri S. Cohen offers a close reading of the description of the panhandler's death, which is “a mimetic description, not from the medical aspect but from the literary one”. Uri S. Cohen, *Hisardut: Tfisat hamavet bein milhamot ha'olam be'Eretz Israel uve'Italia* [Survival: Senses of Death Between the World Wars] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 45.

<sup>49</sup> Bolded text in quotes represents my own emphasis; original emphases are set in italics.

<sup>50</sup> To my knowledge, no critic has indicated this chronological reversal.

The narrator, however, refuses to succumb to the story he has just told and continues to call the panhandler by his definite description and Menashe Hayim by the name with which he has agreed to part, thus introducing another gap between the narrative and the fictional world.

The narrator tells of a disrupted world, where things are not as they are meant to be, where the name indicates a man who is not its 'proper' owner, but at the same time the narrator 'remembers' this world in its proper, amended state. He continues to represent the fictional world in accordance with this memory even while describing it in its disrupted state. His discordance, then, is manifested even in the basic act of referring to the protagonist. As is always the case with the novella's discordant (or ironic) narrator, beneath the positive 'official' story lies a darker covert one. In the former, Menashe Hayim is still called by his name and is respectively an 'autonomous' figure who makes a tragic choice when he succumbs to the temptations of the Lashkovits fair. In the latter, however, he is stripped of everything that once made him 'Menashe Hayim': his family, his work, his house. And finally he is stripped of the last thread that made him 'himself': his name. As it turns out, although he sold it, the name did not belong to Menashe Hayim so much as he belonged to it. Thus he is now the nameless panhandler whose fate is determined by the man who bears his name, a determination that will reach its conclusion only upon his death.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Like the narrator, I continue to refer to Menashe Hayim by this name despite the fact that my reading suggests that the storyline makes the use of this name far from accurate.

## 5.

Following the panhandler's death the letter is found among his belongings and returned to its author, the rabbi. Despite Kreindel Tcharney's concerns (and perhaps thanks to her efforts), the materiality of the signifier proves itself resilient: the letter is intact. The failure of signification, in the end, is due not to the transitory nature of the signifier but to the problematic relation between sign (the name) and referent.

The rabbi's signature does not accomplish its goal, with the contract it authorized ultimately violated on both sides. The rabbi, for his part, does not keep his ostensive promise that 'this' is Menashe Hayim, while the addressees pay the letter no special attention. Indeed, without the letter Menashe Hayim proves to be a better panhandler than he was when he carried it, perhaps because without his name he is no longer ashamed of begging for alms.

But the rabbi's signature, his name, does have a crucial effect on events, albeit not the one he had aimed for. Thanks to his name, those who find the panhandler's body are able to locate the source of the text and send delegates who return the letter to the rabbi and testify that they saw 'Menashe Hayim' dead and buried. Thanks to the 'tethering' signature, the letter is returned to its source, to its origin. The rabbi immediately recognizes the letter and the seal, just as Kreindel Tcharney, upon seeing the letter, recognizes "the marks of the tears she had shed on the letter when she pasted it to the cloth" (93). Hence, both indentify the signs with which they marked the letter.

Now the rabbi faces a crucial decision: he is to rule on whether Menashe Hayim is incontrovertibly dead, a decision that will directly impact Kreindel Tcharney's current status as an

*agunah* – a woman who is "anchored" to her marriage, typically because her husband has disappeared, and who may not remarry unless she either receives a divorce or can produce solid proof that her husband is dead.

And the rabbi recognized the letter and the seal because they came from under his own hand. And the people told him everything that had happened to the man. The rabbi's face darkened and a terrible apprehension saddened his heart because of his sorrow for that poor woman. Her husband is gone, and there are no witnesses to come and testify that he is dead and so she might remain *agunah* all her life. Certainly the letter of recommendation was written for<sup>52</sup> that woman's husband, and the rabbi knew he had never signed another letter for Menashe Hayim Hacoen and that there was no other man with this name in all the counties. But the letter is only a **distinct sign in the belongings of the deceased**, and in our great teacher's opinion, in *Even ha'ezer* part seventeen<sup>53</sup> this woman is forbidden to marry, since we need **distinct signs in the body** of the deceased and not in his belongings, for fear that the belongings were not of the deceased and another man lent them to him, and the borrower is dead while the owner is alive. (92)

In what follows, the rabbi immerses himself in this rabbinical-semiotic conundrum, consulting various rulings from the *Mishna* to modern Jewish sages, and finds that many scholars have disagreed with rabbi Karo's severe judgment and determined instead that "distinct signs may be counted upon even if they are in his belonging" (92). Among the arguments advanced to sustain this more lenient judgment is the observation that "there is no fear with respect to belongings that one does not lend, and one certainly does not lend a letter of recommendation, since one always needs it" (ibid). He finally rules that Kreindel Tcharney may remarry.

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<sup>52</sup> Literally the text says that the letter was written "for the name" of the woman's husband, and the same expression is repeated in the next sentence, where it says that the rabbi never signed another letter "for the name" Menashe Hayim. The Hebrew expression "for the name", *leshem*, can be translated in both these cases literally, or, in its more common use, 'for', 'to', 'for the sake of', etc.

<sup>53</sup> Rabbi Yosef Karo, the author of *Shulhan arukh* (1565). *Even ha'ezer* is the part of the book that deals with laws of marriage and divorce.



The rabbi's letter, then, is returned to its author, who is asked a simple question: is 'this' indeed Menashe Hayim? Behind the intricate rabbinical debate lies the basic question of reference. But now, unlike during the event of the letter's production, Menashe Hayim is no longer present. The context, which "is never absolutely determinable",<sup>54</sup> has changed, and the rabbi's signature, which must, like any signature, "be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production",<sup>55</sup> can no longer secure the original intention with which it was produced. The rabbi now becomes a reader, an interpreter of his own text.

The semiotic dilemma he faces is fascinating: which signs may be trusted to correctly and validly signify the dead, to be a proper mark for a referent that no longer exists. It is a search for paradoxical signification, the sign having to refer not to a presence but to an absence in order to hermetically verify that the referent is 'non-present' and moreover, 'non-existent'. More than the rabbi needs to determine that Menashe Hayim is dead he must make sure that he is not alive.

Whereas the stricter rabbinical authorities demand "distinct signs in the body of the deceased", the more moderate allow for the "distinct signs" to be found "in his belongings", i.e., close to the body. Since the linguistic ostensive phrase with its deictics – 'this man, Menashe Hayim [...] – is called into question, non-linguistic signs are now required to substitute for the linguistic ones. The name becomes just one sign among many, and not even a privileged one. Like the name, these additional signs are supposed to point to the deceased and indicate that he is indeed 'himself', or rather that he is 'not-himself' in the sense not that he is someone else but that he has

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<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

ceased to exist. The question of reference becomes not only paradoxical but also, a-priori, a question of disrupted or false signification. A sign, the sages assume, can be falsified or misused, and their rulings constitute an attempt to foresee such potential disruptions. The closer the sign to its referent (the more embedded in it and inseparable from it, the more 'real' their connection), the less the sign is prone to lie. In the most radical and safest case, the body becomes its own sign, indicating itself and being indicated by itself at the same time.

Yet this sort of hermetic signification is rarely attainable, and in the absence of distinct signs in the body, the rabbi can either settle for lesser signs or leave Kreindel Tcharney as an *agunah*, probably for life. Eventually, his decision to adopt the more lenient interpretation and pronounce Menahse Hayim dead relies on the only sign available to him: the name. In interpreting his own text the rabbi is in fact ruling on his own status as author. Thus his verdict that 'this is indeed Menashe Hayim' essentially amounts to a preference of his own authority as a writer over Rabbi Karo's common sense.

But is the rabbi's ruling justified? The answer is more complicated than it may appear at first glance. On the one hand, the ruling seems terribly wrong. The rabbi's initial reluctance to deviate from Rabbi Karo's requirement indicates the extent to which the name is an unreliable sign. And indeed, in the given circumstances, the name 'Menashe Hayim' seems to point to the wrong referent. It has been misused, sold to another man, justifying the concerns expressed in the stricter rulings. Ironically, though he seems sympathetically inclined toward Kreindel Tcharney, in fact, from a religious point of view, he is condemning her to a life of grave sin. In this respect, the narrative implies that the rabbi should have adhered to Rabbi Karo's strict requirements of signification.

Considered from a different perspective, however, one that takes the act of selling the name seriously, the rabbi's decision is perfectly justified. Menashe Hayim who sold his name is simply no longer Menashe Hayim, even if the narrator persists in calling him so. The link between name and referent may be fragile, enabling Menashe Hayim to pass his name on to another with no special difficulty, but once sold, the name operates as it 'officially' should: it points to its new owner. The intuitive judgment that the rabbi is wrong is based on the assumption, enhanced by the narrator's use of the name, that Menashe Hayim is still Menashe Hayim despite having parted with his name. Moreover, in terms of its effect on the plot and on the fate of its original bearer, the name proves to be highly operative – not at all a useless sign. At the moment of the rabbi's ruling, it is Menashe Hayim's name (or former name) that seals his fate of untimely death.

The entire halakhic deliberation, which is described in much detail, referencing historic sages as well as particular entries from the *Mishna* and from later sources of Jewish law, did not appear in earlier editions of "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight". As Yaakov Bahat notes, it was first introduced in the novella's 1953 edition. In the earlier versions, Kreindel Tcharney's predicament is swiftly resolved, the narrative arriving at the same result via a shorter route:

And the rabbi recognized the letter and the seal because they came from under his own hand. And the people told him everything that had happened to the man. And so the wise rabbi immersed himself in the waters of knowledge and retrieved a permission for poor Kreindel Tcharney because of what they said that Menashe Hayim Hacoheh of Buczacz died and there is no other Menashe Hayim Hacoheh in all those counties except for the one to whom the rabbi himself gave the recommendation, and now witnesses have come and testified: we have buried him".<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Bahat, "Vehaya he'akov", 61-62.

Bahat points to an additional revision, also appearing in the 1953 edition and onward. When Kreindel Tcharney prepares the letter of recommendation for Menashe Hayim's voyage she suddenly breaks into tears, crying (in all editions) "Menashe Hayim Menashe Hayim, when will you come back to me" (67). In the later editions Menashe Hayim suggests to his wife that after his departure she read two or three chapters of *Tehilim* (Psalms) every day, and promises to return home before she reads through all the Psalms.<sup>57</sup> In earlier editions, however, he proposes a different idea:

Go and do the following Kreindely, here is what remained of the cloth from the recommendation, draw out of this fabric one thread every day, and may each thread that you draw constitute mercy and grace and benevolence that are drawn upon us from above, and if God so wishes, before the threads in the fabric run out all our troubles will be over as well. It is a sign, and a sign does no harm and may urge the angel [...].<sup>58</sup>

Bahat offers a biographical explanation for both revisions, arguing that as Agnon became more religious he decided to replace the "unmistakably secular sign" of the thread with the Psalms. This passage was altered, Bahat maintains, not because the nature of the characters had changed but because the author himself underwent a transformation, and it is for this same reason that the historical rabbinical debate on how to determine the identity of the deceased was added.<sup>59</sup> But rather than thinking of the revision in biographical terms, I propose to consider it in terms of narrative consistency and the particular nature of the novella's narrator. Seen as a reference to

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<sup>57</sup> Since there are 150 Psalms we may infer that Menashe Hayim's expectation was to return within about two months.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Bahat, "Vehaya he'akov", 60.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 60-61.

Penelope waiting for Odysseus, the motif of the thread is inconsistent with the characterization of the pietistic narrator, who is not likely to refer to world literature, thus the 'foreign' element was erased in the revised version and substituted with a 'Jewish' marker of the passage of time that is more plausible for the narrator of this text. For the same reason it is not plausible for this narrator to give such cursory consideration to the complicated issue of the *agunah* and the entire rabbinical law that concerns it, given that it is the rabbi's misruling on the matter that determines the story's outcome.

Both revisions touch upon distinctly semiotic questions: first, how to signify the passage of time, and second, what counts as a valid sign of the dead. In both instances we find Agnon revising a semiotic moment in which a character (Menashe Hayim and the rabbi respectively) determines what should constitute the signifier for a given signified. But whereas in the case of the passage of time Agnon replaced the physical, tangible signifier of the thread with a linguistic one (the holy words to be uttered by Kreindel Tcharney),<sup>60</sup> in the second instance of revision an almost reverse process occurred. In the earlier editions the rabbi immediately accepts the letter along with the testimony of the delegates as proof for Menashe Hayim's death. The words of the delegates, who "told him everything that had happened", "said that Menashe Hayim Hacoheh of Buczacz died", and "came and testified: we have buried him" are referenced repeatedly by the narrator and indeed are given much credit by the rabbi, who simply chooses to believe them. In the 1953 edition, not only do the words of the delegates (here mentioned only once) fail to convince him that

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<sup>60</sup> This is what Barthes calls 'connotative semiotics': a certain semiotic system becomes the signifier of a different system. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 89-93.

Menashe Hayim is dead, they indeed have an opposite effect on him. Thus, right after the “people told him everything that had happened to the man” his face darkens and his heart fills with apprehension – since their questionable testimony here marks not the end but the beginning of Kreindel Tcharney’s troubles. Unlike in the early version, here their words are not considered testimony – “there are **no witnesses** to come and testify that he is dead and so she might remain *agunah*” – and the rabbi is even reluctant to rely on his own written words, considering them an insufficiently “distinct” sign. Instead of words, he longs for another kind of sign, preferably a tangible one, some sort of unequivocal mark of the dead human being, or else of the death of the human being.

Moreover, in both these revised scenes the artificiality and arbitrariness of the sign are accentuated. As Barthes points out, in most semiological languages, which differ from the ordinary linguistic model, the language is elaborated by a deciding group and not by the “speaking masses”, hence the sign in these languages is “really and truly ‘arbitrary’ since it is founded in an artificial fashion by a unilateral decision”, resulting in what he calls “fabricated languages”.<sup>61</sup> Menashe Hayim unilaterally declares the arbitrary sign that will eventually prove to be invalid. Kreindel Tcharney follows his suggestion in both versions. In the early editions “her heart pounded when she saw the [number of] threads decreasing, and how she rejoiced when she drew the last threads of the cloth, [...] and how she grew tired of her daily labor seeing that her hope had been dashed until she finally despaired from ever seeing her husband Menashe Hayim again”.<sup>62</sup> The tangibility of the

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<sup>61</sup> Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 31.

<sup>62</sup> Bahat, “Vehaya he’akov”, 61.

threads rendered the earlier sign inflexible, since the number of threads is limited, but the words of Psalms can be uttered over and over again, as indeed they are in the revised editions: again, Kreindel Tcharney's heart pounds with the decreasing Psalms, and she rejoices when she reaches the final ones, but here she "finished the book of *Tehilim* several times" before losing all hope (91). The rabbi's sign is less unilateral than Menashe Hayim's, and may seem less arbitrary, but is nonetheless created by a powerful 'decision group' – the various historical rabbinical precedents he consults.

Yehuda Friedlander, who dedicates a short essay to the revised paragraph of the rabbi's ruling, disagrees with Bahat's understanding of the textual digression that describes the rabbi's vacillation before freeing Kreindel Tcharney from the oppressive status of the *agunah*. According to Friedlander, Agnon's revision of the paragraph is anything but religious in nature. On the contrary, it manifests a latent rebellion that is familiar to us from the secular anti-religious literature of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment movement. Friedlander closely examines each of the sources on which the rabbi bases his decision, pointing out many inaccuracies in the rabbi's reading of these sources and his inferences from them, "as if the narrator expects the reader to confront the references with the story and realize the deliberate deception".<sup>63</sup> Friedlander's final conclusion is that Agnon, whose characterization of rabbis differs greatly from their scornful characterizations at the hands of *Haskalah* authors, nonetheless deepens the secular infrastructure of his text with this passage. Irony once again rears its head. Whether the irony is the narrator's own, as Friedlander

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<sup>63</sup> Yehuda Friedlander, "Shki'ei halakhah vetifkudam betashtit hasipur 'Vehaya he'akov lemihsor'" [Residues of Halakhah and their Function in the Infrastructure of 'And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight'], in *Al Vehaya*, ed. Friedlander, 214.

contends, or whether the narrator (who recounts the rabbi's mistake without in any way indicating it to the reader) is rather discordant – thus locating the irony 'behind his back' – the text is cast as a misreading and a misinterpretation of other texts. Friedlander is not the only critic to emphasize Agnon's implicit references in "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" to the literature of the *Haskalah*, especially to Y.L. Gordon's famous narrative poem "*Kotzo shel yod*" (1876). Bahat also mentions this link, as does Ziva Shamir, who subtitles her essay on the subject: "Agnon's Reply to Y.L.G" (Y.L. Gordon).<sup>64</sup> Shamir contends that the main body of literary work with which Agnon argues in this story is Y.L.G's long poems, which are all satires on the faults of traditional Jewish life and are especially reproachful of religious institutions. She notes that Y.L.G was the first to make the issue of the *agunah*, an obsession of Agnon's, into a symbol of the tragic Jewish condition.

According to Shamir, Y.L.G's "*Kotzo shel yod*" ("The Tip of the Letter *Yod*") served as a model for Agnon's novella in many aspects: linguistic, compositional, thematic, and ideological. Both texts, for example, take place during the 1850's. Y.L.G's story tells of Bat-Shua, a wealthy young woman who similarly encounters economic hardship and whose husband, Hillel, goes overseas to seek livelihood and never returns. Before his death at sea he sends Bat-Shua a document of divorce that will enable her to remarry. However, at the last moment, just before signing the divorce, the narrow minded rabbi notices that Hillel slightly misspelled his name, omitting the letter *Yod* – the smallest letter in the Hebrew Alphabet – an omission that has no real effect on the pronunciation of the name. The strict rabbi disqualifies the divorce, condemning Bat-Shua to a life of indigence and misery.

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<sup>64</sup> Ziva Shamir, "Halakhah lema'ase – Tshuvato shel Agnon le-Y.L.G. beVehaya he'akov lemishor" [Agnon's Reply to Y.L.G], in *Al Vehaya*, ed. Friedlander, 189-209.



In Shamir's reading of "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" Agnon questions Y.L.G's severe attack on the rabbi's brutally strict ruling. After all, had the rabbi of Buczacz acted like the rabbis of Y.L.G's texts, Menashe Hayim would have returned home to find his wife unmarried, and they would have lived happily ever after. Hence the tragedy, in Agnon's version, results from the rabbi's liberal verdict, and not from an overly strict one.<sup>65</sup>

The drama of the Y.L.G poem to which Agnon refers (whether through direct argument, as Shamir contends,<sup>66</sup> or through a less explicit form of intertextuality) revolves around a name that is misspelled and thereupon determines someone's fate. In Y.L.G's sarcastic text, the insistence on the name's accuracy is portrayed as petty and eventually terribly cruel.<sup>67</sup> This sort of belittling of the importance bestowed on names in traditional Jewish life and rabbinical law is not uncommon among authors of the *Haskalah*. *Be'emek habekha* ("In the Vale of Tears"), the seminal work by S.Y. Abramovitch opens with the birth of child into an indigent family. Abramovitch caustically describes the parents, who, in place of such sensible questions as what might become of their child given their destitution or whether they ought to have brought another creature into such a life of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 202-203.

<sup>66</sup> To sustain her argument that Agnon's work is indeed a "contrapuntal reply", Shamir draws attention to a certain point in which he "gives his reader and interpreters a key to the riddle concerning the identity of his text": the common expression "*Kotzo shel yod*" appears in "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" when it is said that the men whom Menashe Hayim asked for charity "indeed did not reject him altogether but from their frown it was obvious that a gentile with a business the size of the tip of the letter *yod* is more important to them than all the charity and mercy in the world". Ibid, 204; Agnon, "Vehaya he'akov lemishor", 72.

<sup>67</sup> The insistence on the accuracy of the name is related to the mystical conception of names, which places great emphasis on the accurate spelling of names. Yosef Dan, who discusses the function of the name in the magical formula, compares its communicative role to that of a telephone number in human communication: "An error in one letter, like one wrong digit in a telephone number, completely prevents communication". Yosef Dan, *Al hakdusha: Dat, musar umistika bayahadut uvedatot aherot* [On Sacredness: Religion, Morals and Mysticism in Judaism and Other Religions] (Jerusalem: Magnes and Hebrew University, 1998), 129.

wretchedness, consider only how to name the newborn, whereupon they finally find cause for distress: all the given names in the family are already taken up by their older children, with no name left for the newborn.<sup>68</sup>

Both these prominent texts of the *Haskalah* posit proper names in opposition to the concrete and substantial circumstances of life. Both suggest that, in traditional Jewish communities, the sign, the proper name, was accorded unreasonable and destructive significance at the expense of its bearer (and the bearer's kin). Instead of treating the name as no more than an arbitrary signifier – a linguistic means of representing or pointing to the named person – the linguistic entity is given priority over the human being. This opposition is almost identical to the one presented by Menashe Hayim when he contemplates selling the letter and eventually favors his actual existence over his name; but in Agnon's text, the opposition will prove to be fallacious, even dangerous. There is no actual existence for he who has forsaken his name, as Menashe Hayim learns upon his return to Buczacz.

## 6.

In the closing scene of “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight” the protagonist and his name are finally reunited. Some while earlier, returning home after almost five years of absence, Menashe Hayim arrives on the day of the circumcision of Kreindel Tcharney's newborn son. From the *Halakhic* perspective, Kreindel Tcharney's remarriage and bearing of a son is a terrible aberration. A

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<sup>68</sup> This is because, as tradition dictates, the parents only consider naming the child after their relatives. I elaborate on this custom in the following chapter.

married couple's barrenness is a recurring motif in Jewish pietistic stories, generally signaling a match not made in heaven and typically understood as resulting from the wife's infertility. Menashe Hayim and Kreindel Tcharney are childless, a fact delivered at the opening of the story and emphasized no less than their economic hardship. But as Menashe Hayim finds his wife with a newborn child, two facts come clear: first, that his wife was not responsible for their barrenness; but more importantly, that the sinful marriage of a woman who is still married to another (the very circumstance that the status of an *agunah* is intended to prevent) led to the birth of a healthy son, suggesting heavenly endorsement of the sinful marriage. Herein lies the text's most subversive motion: its defiance of Jewish rabbinical law, and in particular of a law that is ostensibly one of the novella's textual and ideological foundations.

Notwithstanding this subversiveness, Menashe Hayim's death at the story's conclusion does, in the eyes of the *Halakhah*, resolve the aberrance and legitimize Kreindel Tcharney's sinful marriage and bastard son. As Uri S. Cohen observes, the death of the panhandler is also Menashe Hayim's death but it is only upon the latter's return to town that his death becomes clear in the form of the gap between his existence and his inexistence within the community.<sup>69</sup> As he enters Buczacz, no one recognizes Menashe Hayim, which "seemed very strange to him, is it possible that he had changed so much in such a short time that nobody knows him?" (96). He then assumes that his name will also not be recognized: "How would he ask [where to find Kreindel Tcharney], perhaps he was gone for so long that his name has been forgotten" (97). But once again he is surprised, this time to learn that his name, unlike he himself, is well remembered.

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<sup>69</sup> Cohen, *Hisardut*, 45.

Once he understands what has unfolded in his absence, Menashe Hayim decides not to reveal who he is (and indeed – who is he?).<sup>70</sup> Instead he leaves Buczacz for the second time and retreats into oblivion, wandering from one town to another, walking mostly at night and sleeping in the local cemeteries so as not to be seen or recognized. Soon, “his wandering made him so weak that he could hardly walk another step. And thus he rejoiced, realizing that his death was close and his grave open before him” (100). Several critics have maintained that herein lie Menashe Hayim’s atonement and redemption.<sup>71</sup> By the official standards of rabbinical law he should have declared himself alive, thereby exposing the sinful remarriage and the bastard child. Instead, he decides to spare Kreindel Tcharney any further suffering or disgrace and takes the suffering upon himself. With this choice – to leave his town again and live out the rest of his life in complete anonymity – he effectively decides not to reclaim his name. He realizes that his name is now the name of a dead man, and resolves to become a dead man himself, as if in doing so he might re-appropriate the name.<sup>72</sup>

In the closing scene, which takes place in the cemetery where the panhandler was buried, the folklore tale's shocking meeting between the allegedly dead protagonist and his wife is replaced by another shocking meeting: that of Menashe Hayim and his name.

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<sup>70</sup> In the folklore story cited by Yaari as an early source of the novella, the protagonist reveals his identity, resulting in his wife’s death of shock and disgrace.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example: Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 88.

<sup>72</sup> Agnon is careful not to depict Menashe Hayim’s willful death as suicide, which is yet another severe sin for a Jew. Band indicates that this is why Menashe Hayim “never considers ending his misery by his own act”. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 88.

One day the cemetery keeper who was also the stones engraver<sup>73</sup> stood in front of a fine big gravestone, trying to make it utterly perfect. How astonished Menashe Hayim was when he saw his name engraved on the stone [...]. And he said to himself, there are two puzzles here. First, how does this man know my name and my father's name, and second, why does a sinner like myself deserve to please his bones with such a precious gravestone". (101)

Meeting with one's own name on a gravestone is indeed an astonishing moment.<sup>74</sup> But Menashe Hayim's astonishment is not at the fact that he is beholding his own gravestone, that he is considered dead. Indeed, death is not at all presented as an issue of interest; it is self evident. His surprise is rather a positive one, stemming from the fact that the stone engraver should know his name and should labor to make such a fine gravestone for his sake. For Menashe Hayim, though the name is still 'his', or at least is soon to be his again, he nonetheless does not deserve such a gravestone. He has, it seems, accepted the loss of all his old properties (possession of which would have justified a respectable tombstone) – save for the name.

From the moment Menashe Hayim sees the gravestone he cannot take his eyes off it. Speechless, he stands staring at the monument, and at the cemetery keeper who is preparing to engrave the deceased's date of death. At this moment the story revolves around telling a story: the cemetery keeper sees Menashe Hayim staring silently at the stone and, in an effort to draw him to talk, he himself begins telling about Kreindel Tcharney's visit to the panhandler's grave. Menashe

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<sup>73</sup> Cohen points out that the Hebrew term used by Agnon for 'engraver' (*mehokek*) also means 'legislator'. Cohen, *Hisardut*, 50.

<sup>74</sup> Weiss compares Menashe Hayim's meeting with his gravestone to a similar meeting in Kafka's "Dream", where Joseph K. digs his own grave and jumps into it; over the grave he spots and is captivated by a beautiful gravestone in which his name is engraved. Weiss, "Vehaya he'akov", 83-84.

Hayim's first reaction to the keeper's story is a strange combination of tears and laughter, and he retains his silence, for "if I will tell, I will do myself no good while ruining the lives of others" (102).

Cohen maintains that whereas the first gravestone is prepared by the engraver in ignorance of Menashe Hayim's story, there is a second one – the story itself – which constitutes "the true gravestone", since it is made with proficiency and includes Menashe Hayim's voice. Cohen proposes an intricate triangular figure that captures the nature of the story. It is made up of the buyer of the text, who dies under a borrowed identity as the owner of a story that is not his; the cemetery keeper, who is the artist – the reader and writer of the gravestone; and Menashe Hayim, who dies mainly because of the loss of the text. The gaze of the 'real' Menashe Hayim who sees his name engraved on the stone is the gaze of the author who sees his name at the beginning of the story, Cohen adds.<sup>75</sup>

Only after a long and subtle negotiation, which is in many ways a mirror image of the earlier negotiation with the panhandler, and only after the keeper promises to be "silent as a grave and not to say a word", does Menashe Hayim agree to tell his story.

Menashe Hayim finished talking and they both understood who the woman who had come to put a tombstone for Menashe Hayim was, it was Kreindel Tcharney, Kreindel Tcharney the wife of Menashe Hayim. And from that moment on Menashe Hayim did not say a single word, he merely fortified his heart with God using the last of his strength. Every now and then he left his place and went over to the cemetery hedge to look on from afar at the grave of that panhandler, that pseudo Menashe Hayim, who had enticed him to sin and took his wife away from him and annihilated his name from Israel for eternity. And fire engulfed his bones. From one day to the next his body diminished until he died. And the keeper who was familiar with the story we have told above placed the gravestone with he who deserved it and gave a

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<sup>75</sup> Cohen, *Hisardut*, 50-51.

name and remainder in Israel to Menashe Hayim Hacoen who left the world lonely and childless.<sup>76</sup> And when the time came, Kreindel Tcharney stood over the grave of Menashe Hayim and her tears fell on his ashes. (103)

After years of wandering, Menashe Hayim can literally no longer move: his eyes are fixed upon his name until eventually he dies. He is then buried under the gravestone in which his name is forever engraved. The ending appears like a perfect denouement, in which the crooked is made straight. Finally, the name is returned to its rightful owner and properly fastened to him by a substantial connection; materiality and signification are now safely integrated.

Yet the paradox of this moment is unmistakable. The name points to the 'correct' referent at the very moment that the referent ceases to exist, that is to say, when reference is no longer useful. The name's previous failure to signify its bearer's existence is now replaced with a resonating success in signifying its absence, while always recalling the lost existence. Derrida writes of the "the mortal bodies which disappear behind the sur-vival of the name", and of the name that "is made to do without the life of the bearer, and is therefore always somewhat the name of a dead man".<sup>77</sup> And indeed, in this scene, the name is presented as the remainder that subsists after death. At the moment of death it is finally released of its referential duties and is free to function in an entirely different way, as an apparatus of memory. It is no longer a sign that substitutes for something else but rather a commemoration in and of itself.

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<sup>76</sup> In Hebrew: "ariri".

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, "De Tours De Babel", trans. Gil Anidjar, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, (New York: Routledge 2002), 118; *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 39.

As Weiss points out, the motif of “name and remainder” recurs several times in the text. First, on the text's very first page, or indeed before it, in an introductory passage that summarizes the story in a few words, informing readers that eventually Menashe Hayim “was given a name and remainder as is told inside the book at length” (47). Four similar summarizing passages appear at the head of each chapter, but this first synopsis is particularly intriguing insofar as it emphatically raises a question of authorship: who is telling the story? Agnon's texts often undermine the conventional distinction between a fictional narrator and the author, or in Michel Foucault's more elaborate distinction, between the author, the real writer, and the fictitious speaker, all of whom are distinct entities.<sup>78</sup> Agnon's first synopsis precedes the dedication of the text to his mother (“In memory of my mother, my mentor, Ms Esther, may she rest in peace”), making it all the more implausible to distinguish the author from ‘the narrator’ in this first passage. From the perspective of the name, it is especially significant that the author proclaims right at the outset that Menashe Hayim was eventually granted “name and remainder” (an assertion repeated at the end of the novella), since this amounts to an interpretation of the text's outcome that is neither obvious nor exclusive. At the opening of his reading, Weiss asks: “What is the meaning of giving ‘name and remainder’ to Menashe Hayim Hacoen by the keeper's placing of a gravestone. Is it ironic?” If the narrator sees death as a final end, Weiss maintains, then the making and placing of the gravestone is a meaningless and indeed grotesque action, whereas if the passage is grounded in a genuine belief in giving name and remainder and in its meaningfulness as an afterlife, then there is no irony

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<sup>78</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author”, in *Textual Strategies, Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harari (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 152. See Gershon Shaked's discussion of the relations between Agnon the author, the narrator, and the character in Agnon's *A Guest for the Night: “Hamesaper Kesofer”* [The Narrator as Author], in *Omanut hasipur shel Agnon* [The Narrative art of S.Y. Agnon] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1973), 264-78.



here. Weiss ultimately adopts the latter scenario;<sup>79</sup> yet there are alternative paths to exploring his question of irony. I suggest looking for irony in the discrepancies between the narrator's words and those of Kreindel Tcharney and Menashe Hayim, discrepancies that expose this narrator's discordance in the most emphatic manner yet encountered.

In setting the gravestone in its proper place, the cemetery keeper, according to the narrator, gives "a name and remainder in Israel to Menashe Hayim Hacoheh who left the world lonely and childless". In light of the resonating lack of an offspring, the name is the remainder. Lauterbach discusses the biblical idea that the preservation of a person's name secures an immortality of sorts, while complete obliteration of the name implies one's utter destruction. In biblical times, this preservation meant no more than remembering the name, and was not achieved by passing a name onto the descendents. This remembering, in turn, was ensured "by leaving someone or something, children or property, which having belonged to that person, would always be identified with his name, so that subsequent generations, in referring to his descendants or his property, would mention the name".<sup>80</sup> Later, the name itself became the carrier of memory, and the preservation of one's memory by passing one's name on to descendents became a prevailing custom. In Menashe Hayim's case, there is no remainder whatsoever, no child nor anything else, to ensure the preservation of the name.

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<sup>79</sup> Weiss, "Vehaya he'akov", 81-84.

<sup>80</sup> Lauterbach, *Studies in Jewish Law*, 32. The only case mentioned in the bible of naming an infant after his ancestors is that of Nahor, brother of Abraham, who had the same name as his grandfather. However, as Lauterbach points out, there is no indication that the child was thus named to commemorate his father's father. *Ibid*, 35.

Instead, it is the name itself – in and by itself – that constitutes the remainder, so that the two become synonymous. Once freed of the obligation to refer, the name now functions on a different level altogether, as an apparatus of memory. Whereas the operation of name as reference consists in distinction and differentiation (which is why multiple bearerhood constitutes a theoretical obstacle), name as memory consists in resemblance, in continuity and contiguity. The purpose of commemoration through names is not to distinguish between bearers but to substantiate a link between them.

The text ends with Kreindel Tcharney's tears falling on Menashe Hayim's ashes – the only concrete residue that he has left behind and the antithesis of a living offspring. Earlier, upon hearing of his 'death', Kreindel Tcharney weighed two options for the commemoration of her husband's name: naming her son after him (ruled out because *hashem gorem*), and making him a gravestone. A child would bear the name for the duration of his life, whereas a stone will bear it for eternity, thus she replaces one manner of commemorating and perpetuating with another, which strikes her as 'safer'. Indeed, the gravestone, far from allowing the name to continue to act in the world, keeps it eternally arrested, fastened to the mute, immobile stone.

More important yet is to note that Kreindel Tcharney perceives both these options as mere compensations for the resounding fact that Menashe Hayim "is lost and has no remainder in Israel" (94). In her interpretation of this phrase, which is distinctly more somber than that of the narrator, Menashe Hayim left no remainder, and this is precisely why his name should be sustained in one way or another. To her, the name compensates for the lack of an offspring but is not, and cannot be, a remainder in itself, merely its substitution.

Finally, Menashe Hayim's own view is more radical still. From his perspective, there is not even a name left after him, as he explicitly expresses in his final morbid musings about "**that pseudo Menashe Hayim** who enticed him to sin and took his wife away from him and **annihilated his name from Israel for eternity**". The fundamental discrepancy between this assertion and that of the narrator, which immediately follows, is striking. The protagonist offers a severe reading of his own story, one that cannot be dismissed as a simple misunderstanding. Since Menashe Hayim sentences himself to this nameless eternity after having already told the keeper his story, he can assume that the keeper will try to make the crooked straight with the gravestone, and yet, as far as his name is concerned, he is not satisfied with this correction. Menashe Hayim, not by chance, is the only one who refers to the panhandler by the name that he bought: "pseudo Menashe Hayim". In his interpretation the name emerges as a site of destruction. The selling of the name is treated so seriously that the act seems irreversible and unsusceptible to remedy, while the rabbi's ruling that 'this' is indeed the dead Menashe Hayim can similarly not be overturned. The understanding that began to emerge already during his negotiation with the panhandler, that once sold to another the name will not remain static but will change and adjust in accordance with its new bearer – this understanding now reaches its full crescendo. The narrator's optimistic view of 'name and remainder' operates on the premise that the name essentially remained Menashe Hayim's, and that the disruption created by the selling was temporary and amendable. But Menashe Hayim contends that the selling of the name cannot be overturned. His own sins toward Kreindel Tcharney can perhaps be revoked (though even this much is not certain) but the sin of parting with his name leaves its mark "for eternity". The referential crisis that begins with the selling of the name and

seemingly ends with death does not, in Menashe Hayim's reading of his story, allow for the rectifying option of commemoration. The name is no longer his to remain or remind.

The second gravestone, as Cohen calls it – the story, which includes Menashe Hayim's voice and which can be read as an intricate figure of ownership and authorship of the text, gives Menashe Hayim his name by telling the story of his name and by embedding his name in the story; yet if we listen closely, the protagonist's voice within this story tells us of the irrevocable loss of a name, which is at once a loss of life as well as afterlife.

## Chapter 2: Right Names, Wrong Naming

### The Propriety of Names and the Drama of Naming in *A Simple Story*

#### 1.

*A Simple Story* (*Sipur pashut*), Agnon's second novel, was published in 1935. Its last chapter opens with a seemingly idyllic scene, the birth of a son to Hirshl Hurvitz, the protagonist, and to his wife Mina Ziemlich. The couple is described standing over the baby's crib, rejoicing in his birth and admiring his every gesture. I begin my reading of the novel with this scene, or rather with a question about it.<sup>1</sup>

In the last decades, Dan Miron maintains, critics have tended to focus on the novel's denouement as a key to its interpretation. Miron reviews the long historical development in the interpretative reception of the novel, showing that it shifted its focus not only between different aspects of the text but also from certain portions of it to others. In the 1930's and 1940's, the founding figures of Agnon criticism – Dov Sadan, Gustav Kroyanker, and Kurzweil – tried to integrate

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<sup>1</sup> S.Y. Agnon, "Sipur pashut" [A Simple Story], in *Al Kapot Ha'manul* [At the Handle of the Lock] (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 44-214. The novel was translated into English by Hillel Halkin. However, all translations from *A Simple Story* are my own. Unless otherwise indicated, references in this chapter are to the page numbers in the Hebrew text, and they appear in the body of the text. My translation is assisted by Halkin's, to which I sometimes refer directly. Contrary to his explicatory translation, which takes many liberties with Agnon's text, mine is deliberately literal so as to convey as well as possible the Hebrew nuances I discuss. Hillel Halkin, trans., *A Simple Story* by S.Y. Agnon (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

the story of Hirshl Hurvitz and his tragic love to his indigent relative Blume Nacht into a broader depiction of the author's work. Agnon's writing was viewed as articulating an ongoing story about the transitions in Jewish life during an era of profound changes, shifting from a communal, traditional world of faith to a modern, individualist and atheist one. From this perspective, *A Simple Story*, which takes place in a Galician Jewish community in a city called Shybush at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> was seen as a reflection of an extremely difficult phase in the transition between generations. These interpretations concentrated on the first part of the novel, which describes the basic conflict between Hirshl's passionate love for Blume and the social constraints imposed on him.

The critics of the 1950's and 1960's largely accepted their predecessors' general assumptions, and turned to focus on the novel itself and its thematic and artistic texture. Shaked, Arnold Band, Hillel Barzel, and others discussed the structural, stylistic, and thematic elements and their composition. At this stage, the bulk of the interpretative effort was aimed at the novel's midpoint, in which Hirshl's emotional tension – his longing for Blume and his reluctant marriage to Mina Ziemlich – escalates until it triggers a psychotic outburst.

After a certain lull in the interpretative effort during the 1970's, the next decade, according to Miron, saw a new wave of criticism whose agents included not only literary scholars but also well-known Hebrew authors, such as A.B. Yehushua and Amos Oz, as well as physiologists and psychiatrists. The novel's final 10 chapters, the denouement chapters describing Hirshl's path back into sanity, attracted new interest, despite their anticlimactic nature. Hirshl, who upon his return

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<sup>2</sup> Shybush, according to the novel, is "A town of fifteen thousand people, more than half of which are Jews." *A Simple Story*, 203.

home from the mental clinic is compelled to adjust to his duties as husband and father, sinks into the petit-bourgeois life of a well-off merchant, a quotidian existence devoid of excitement and turmoil. The static, eventless state of the protagonist's existence, and ostensibly of the text itself, began to fascinate readers who perceived the novel's closure as pivotal for their interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

The issue of closure is raised already within the text itself, in the atypical remark by the narrator that ends the novel:<sup>4</sup> "Hirshl's story is finished, and so is Mina's story, but the story of Blume is not over. Everything that happened to Blume Nacht is a book in its own right. Also the matter of Getzel Stein which we mentioned only in passing and all the others embedded in our simple story,[...] how much ink we shall spill and how many pens we will break to write down their stories.<sup>5</sup> God knows when" (214). And indeed, the novel, which starts out with a symmetrical structure, recounting first Blume's story and then Hirshl's, followed by their meeting, soon abandons this symmetry to concentrate on the male protagonist. In this respect it clearly does not offer full closure; but does it truly provide closure, as the narrator asserts, with respect to Hirshl Hurvitz? And if so, what is the meaning and nature of this closure?

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Miron, *Harofé hamedume: Iyunim basiporet hayehudit haklasit* [Le Médecin Imaginaire: Studies in Classical Jewish Fiction] (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz hame'uhad, 1995), 165-69.

<sup>4</sup> While the comment is atypical of the narrator of *A Simple Story*, who is not inclined to meta-poetic remarks, it is typical of Agnon's fiction in general. For the most part, the narrator of *A Simple Story* is no longer pietistic as in Agnon's early works (including "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" presented in the previous chapter). The story he tells, as well as the style of his narration, is much closer to the realistic novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century than to traditional Jewish pietistic tales. Relative to the narrator of "And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight", his presence in the novel is much less accentuated, and whereas the former is characterized as a discordant narrator who may also be perceived as ironic, the irony of the narrator of *A Simple Story* is unquestionable.

<sup>5</sup> Agnon never did write the story of Blume Nacht. He later made similar promises that would not be fulfilled.

Various and contradicting answers have been given to these questions, in readings to which I shall later return. Yet no attention has been paid to a certain odd fact concerning Hirshl and Mina's newborn second son, whose birth, at the end of the last chapter, ostensibly vouchsafes their delayed love and happiness.

Meshulam's brother came into world with a smile on his face. [...] A thousand joys he brought his parents, and a thousand names they called him, with every day that God created he created a new name. Some names have a meaning, some do not. So many names they called him that his crib name was forgotten. (213-14)<sup>6</sup>

Rather than disclosing the child's name, the narrator describes in great detail how his given name was forgotten, substituted by "a thousand names", none of which is mentioned. Behind the abundance of names, the child himself, at least as far as the narrative goes, remains nameless. As I will show, given the ubiquity of significant references to naming throughout the novel, it seems improbable that the narrator simply neglects to give the baby's name or thinks it unworthy of mentioning. Why, then, is such effort invested in describing the naming of a child whose name is not narrated? In what follows, I suggest that the operation of names and the various rituals of naming constitute core elements in *A Simple Story*, especially in light of the extraordinary interest the Hurvitz family shows in names and naming. Hence, reading the novel through the prism of names and naming opens up possibilities for a new understanding of the story and particularly of its outcome.

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<sup>6</sup> The verb Agnon uses to describe the 'forgotten' name (*nishtaka*) is an archaic form, which can also be read as 'sank'. A crib name is a common term in the texts of Jewish *Halakhah*, sometimes meaning simply a given name and other times a second secular name that is added to the first 'holy' name of a newborn. See Yosef Rivlin, "Matan shnei shemot lenoladim" [The Practice of Giving Two Birth Names], in *These Are the Names: Studies in Jewish Onomastics*, ed. Aaron Demsky, Joseph A. Reif, Joseph Tabory, vol. 5, (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2011), 133-150 (Hebrew section).



## 2.

The first chapter of *A Simple Story* opens with the story of Blume Nacht, the death of her mother and her somber arrival in the home of her rich relatives, the Hurvitzes, who take her in as a servant. In this chapter, plunging as it does into the story in medias res, no special attention is given to proper names. The second chapter, however, which offers a new opening, this time a well-ordered exposition that concentrates on the Hurvitz family, launches immediately into a remark about naming:

Hirshl was an only child to his father and mother. A firstborn as well as an only child of his parents' later years. After his parents had despaired of having children, they were granted a boy and named him after his mother's father, Shimon Hirsh, yet the first name was forgotten since his crib days, while the second gained an affectionate diminutive out of their love for him. (49)

Names, or at least Hirshl's name as it appears in this passage, are anything but 'rigid', as Kripke would have it. They are mutable, and have a story of their own. Hirshl possessed two names: one was forgotten, for reasons the narrator does not provide; the other metamorphosed, adjusting itself according to a certain emotional reality with which the original name did not seem to accord. As the novel proceeds, the remark about Hirshl's name emerges as a reflection of the Hurvitz family's enduring concern with questions of naming.

Several chapters later, when Hirshl and Blume's love has already flourished and been brutally sabotaged by Tsirl; also after Blume, having fully gauged the exact nature of her situation, removed herself from the Hurvitzes home and found employment in another house, after Hirshl and Mina met, as if accidentally, and after their parents covertly agreed on the terms of their

engagement, Hirshl is invited to a Hanukah party at the house of Sofia Gildenhorn, Mina's best friend. His parents, who were also invited, harbor hopes that this party will seal their son's potential future engagement, and pretending to be busy, send Hirshl off to the social gathering on his own. Everything is set, then, for the engagement but Hirshl himself. He sits alone at the crowded party, surveying the guests, ill at ease. Soon enough he finds a way to pass the time:

Once again Hirshl looked at the group and began to interpret their family names. He said in his heart, a person bearing the name Tshortkover is supposed to be a Tshortkov Hassid, whereas this Leibush is a Bobov Hassid. Or maybe a man's name isn't but his opposite. On the other hand, Kurtz is squab and his name is squab. And this amputee Sheinbard whose name attests to a fine beard – his beard is shaved. But then this thick bearded Leibush Tshortkover, who should have been named after his beard, was named after a city he has nothing to do with. However, family names are always one thing and the owners of the names another. Inasmuch as names can be interpreted, they cannot be interpreted according to their owners. Take this Balaban, for example, who sits next to Isey Heller and doesn't stop smoking, what does his name mean? (83)

This fascinating theoretical meditation on naming passes through Hirshl's mind just before he finds himself engaged to Mina, later that same evening. The logical structure of his argument, its trajectory, is worth tracing. Generally speaking, it is a track whose most typical gesture is 'however': Hirshl makes a certain theoretical assumption concerning names and their bearers, which is then contradicted by an example that he sees before his eyes; he thus reverses his assumption to bring it in line with the refuting example, but then comes up against new evidence, which again does not sit with his most recent hypothesis.

Hirshl begins his mental tour with a positivistic postulate, one that assumes accordance between name and bearer: "[A] person bearing the name Tshortkover is suppose to be a Tshortkov Hassid". This accordance is characterized by a particular directionality: from name to bearer, suggesting that a bearer's defining characteristic can be inferred from their name. He is then

confronted with the first contradiction, as Tshortkover is not a Tshortkov Hassid but a Bobov Hassid – that is, of a rival Hassidic group – and is also unrelated to the town of Tshortkov. Inducing from the contradiction that the exact opposite of his initial assumption holds true, he then considers the possibility that one's name is indeed indicative but in a reverse manner: it signifies 'one's opposite'. Hirshl now faces the Kurtz example – a short man who is called short, contradicting the revised assumption while neatly affirming the first, positivistic one. But for Hirshl it is, so to speak, too late. Having already encountered a refutation of his first postulate, he cannot return to it. Hirshl is perplexed, since he had two contradicting assumptions, both contradicted by examples that just didn't appear at the right time; had he noticed Kurtz first, he could have held to his initial hypothesis. Not knowing what to infer next, Hirshl lets his eyes fall on the next example, Sheinbard, the beardless man whose name means 'pretty beard'. The discrepancy between Sheinbard's name and his appearance extends beyond the mere lack of the relevant physical attribute insofar as it is not the beauty of the beard per se that the name seems to indicate but more broadly that of its owner's overall demeanor, an impressive 'rabbinical' beard marking an honorable, erudite, Orthodox Jewish lifestyle, while the shaven beard implies a modern secular way of life. Once again, the example actually proves Hirshl's assumption (the name signifies an attribute that is contrary to an attribute of its bearer); moreover, it proves his most recent assumption, the one that he has just explicitly articulated; but because it is refuted by the earlier Kurtz example, he is forced to abandon it. Hirshl is now left with two contradictory assumptions and three examples, one supporting the accordance theory, and two undermining it. The next move is interesting, as it amounts to a change of strategy: Hirshl stays with the thought of the beard that Sheinbard should have but doesn't, and returns to his first example – Leibush Tshortkover, who does indeed sport a beard. Unknowingly,

Hirshl is escaping the binary prison of the two contradictory perceptions of the operation of names. The following insight does not literally or explicitly occur to Hirshl but is implied by his line of thought: Tshortkover has more than one characteristic that describes him. There is his congregational affiliation, which his name fails to signify correctly, and there is also his physical feature, which his name also fails to signify, this time not because the name indicates the opposite but because it ignores this feature altogether in its focus on another aspect, which Hirshl deems less dominant (“[he] should have been named after his beard”). Once the game is no longer defined by an ‘either-or’ dichotomy, the binary formula shattered and invaded by the infinite options suggested by a system that acknowledges a multiplicity of attributes, Hirshl is at a loss. He now seeks to distinguish names from their bearers altogether, his new conclusion not a revision of the ‘contradiction assumption’ that names accord reversely with their bearers so much as a complete break with it: he portrays names and bearers as totally disconnected (“family names are always one thing and the owners of the names another”). Names are interpretable, Hirshl’s conclusion proceeds, they are meaningful and their meaning can be contemplated, but “they cannot be interpreted according to their owners”. It is noteworthy that determining a name’s meaning was never Hirshl’s goal in the first place. On the contrary, he wished to determine peoples’ characters according to their names, or at the least to find some form of accordance between the name and the bearer. Thus, toward the end of his argument, Hirshl reverses even the directionality of the preliminary thesis, seeking – though not necessarily finding – the meaning of a name in its bearer and not the ‘meaning’ or essence of a bearer in the name. At the very end of his contemplation Hirshl achieves one more minor contradiction: having just inferred that names are meaningful, he

turns to one last name, Balaban, and finds that, as far as he can tell, it bears no meaning whatsoever.

Hirshl's analytical investigation, his sequence of deduction and induction, postulation and revision, invites comparison with the actual philosophical debates concerning proper names. The first noteworthy point here is that Hirshl's underlying question is similar to, but not identical with, the philosophical one. He does not ask: How do names work?; he asks: Do names work? This leads in turn to another fundamental question, namely: What does it mean for a name 'to work'? The ongoing discourse about proper names in analytical philosophy essentially revolves around the question of reference, that is to say, the way in which a name refers to its bearer: is it by description (Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Searle), or by the causal chain of reference (Kripke).<sup>7</sup> Hirshl doesn't consider the latter option, and his initial postulate is that a name should describe its bearer. But the descriptions Hirshl has in mind differ in important respects from those that feature in the philosophical debate. For philosophers, the descriptive aspect of a proper name is not embedded a priori in the name (or, more precisely, in the name-form). Most analytical debates have revolved around famous proper names, or rather famous bearers who bestowed fame upon their names, such as Socrates (Russell), Moses (Wittgenstein), Aristotle (Searle), Einstein and Nixon (Kripke), and so on. The proper name is discussed in its specific, unique function, referring to the specific well-known referent. A name's sense, to use Frege's terminology, is a description or set of descriptions that derive from the referent, and not vice versa. Thus, in the case of Socrates, for instance, this sense might be 'Plato's teacher', 'the philosopher who drank the poison-cup', etc.

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<sup>7</sup> See the Introduction, sections 2.

Cases of the sort Hirshl considers, in which a name is phonologically identical or similar to a certain noun, adjective, verb, etc. that possesses a lexical meaning, are hardly mentioned or acknowledged within these discussions. Rather, any word, regardless of its lexical meaning, can serve as a proper name to any bearer, regardless of the bearer's attributes. The coupling of name and bearer is entirely arbitrary – hence it is not that the name Yellow describes a yellow person but that the name John, when it refers to a yellow person, is (in Searl's terms) a peg on which the attribute yellow (along with many other of John's attributes) hang. In other words, the sense of the proper name, its descriptive capacity, considered in its unique function as referring to a specific referent, has nothing to do with the lexical meaning of the corresponding word, if such a word exists. This makes the proper name's sense somewhat idiosyncratic. Of course, in famous cases such as Socrates, the descriptive trait 'Plato's teacher' has become common knowledge, rendering the sense of the name more conventional than it typically is (which probably explains the overriding attraction of analytical discussions to famous proper names). Furthermore, within this line of thought, proper names are analyzed as if they are given only once, to a single bearer; as if there was only one 'Aristotle', 'Moses', 'Nixon', and 'John', and therefore 'Aristotle' may designate only the sense related to the Greek philosopher. But in reality, of course, as I discussed in the previous chapter regarding the issue of multiple bearerhood, the same name-forms are used over and over again,<sup>8</sup> and moreover, they are not used arbitrarily: certain names are typically given to certain bearers – for example, 'Sarah' is typically given to females, and 'Yitzhak' to males. This is but one of

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<sup>8</sup> For an elaborate discussion of this point, see Jerrold J. Katz, "A Proper Theory of Names", *Philosophical Studies* 31, 1 (1977): 1-80.

the reasons that proper names are, in all sorts of ways that I discuss below, rich in connotation. The tendency of analytical philosophy to perceive names as if each one of them is given only to one bearer, as well as its disregard of lexical meaning, is what allows for the perception of the arbitrariness of names, which is, as I soon show, decidedly unsustainable.

In contrast with this philosophical notion of arbitrariness, Hirshl expects to find some kind of motivation that would account for the link between name and bearer; he is looking into the “correctness” or “propriety” of names, to use Gérard Genette’s terms in his reading of *Cratylus*, which deals with questions that are very close to Hirshl’s: “Are names well chosen?”; Does a name “[fit] the personality of the one who bears it”? Genette coins the phrase “the eponymy of the name”, which refers to its value as a nickname, presenting an agreement between designation and signification. As a “science”, the eponymy of names is the study of such indirect motivations, which is precisely Hirshl’s study.<sup>9</sup> Hirshl notices that some name-forms bear a certain meaning: ‘short’, ‘pretty beard’, ‘Tshortkov Hassid’; and he seeks to find straightforward accordance (or at least some other simple systematic correlation) between the description of the bearer and the meaning found in the name-form itself.

As it turns out, however, both sides of the equation – the ‘description’ and the ‘meaning of a name’ – are multivalent and therefore do not lend themselves to the kind of simplistic accordance

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<sup>9</sup> Gérard Genette, “Eponymy of the Name”, in *Mimologics*, trans. Thais E. Morgan (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska, 1995), 7-27. The eponymy of the name sometimes manifests itself as “the act of reading the name as a genuine ‘definition’”. Ibid, 17.

that Hirshl seeks out. On the 'description' side of the equation, Hirshl expects the name to correspond with what he conceives as a predominant, rather than a merely contingent, attribute of the name bearer. Yet the expectation itself already contains an implied acknowledgment of the variety of attributes and anticipates the difficulty of determining their hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> On the 'meaning' side of the equation, the names of guests that Hirshl considers clearly demonstrate that a name's 'meaning' is a heterogeneous affair – that names 'mean' in highly various ways.

Some names, like Kurtz, have a lexical meaning,<sup>11</sup> but many others do not (like Hirshl's final study-object, Balaban). The Hebrew lexical meaning of the word Yitzhak,<sup>12</sup> to take another example, is the Hebrew verb 'to laugh' in its male, third-person, future conjugation. The etymology of many names sends us back to a link between a certain attribute of the bearer and the meaning of the name. Many Jewish family names derive, for example, from the occupations of their original bearers, or from a physical characteristic (as in the case of Kurtz).<sup>13</sup> In these cases, and not only in them, it was the description of the man which literally determined the surname. In the biblical

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, the challenge of determining a predominant feature is only one of a whole host of difficulties that plague the question of description. Another complication, considered briefly in the previous chapter, is the issue of change, stemming from the fact that the bearers of names are prone to be 'unstable' as far as their descriptions go.

<sup>11</sup> More accurately formulated, it is not that the name has a lexical meaning but that the name-form is identical or similar to a certain noun, verb, adjective, etc., which has a lexical meaning. In some theoretical discussions, what I refer to as 'lexical meaning' is designated the 'etymology' of the name.

<sup>12</sup> Yitzhak Kummer is the protagonist of Agnon's great novel *Only Yesterday*, which is the subject of the next chapter.

<sup>13</sup> Benzion C. Kaganoff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Names and Their History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 20-30. Kurtz's name is such a solid example of lexical meaning coinciding with description that at one point the character even becomes a victim of his own name. In a conversation between Mina's mother and Hirshl's father, the former can't remember Kurtz's name, since she has substituted it in her mind with his description: "Said Bertha, [...] that little one whose name I forgot. Said Baruch Meir, Kurtz, she means Kurtz. Said Bertha, now I remember, Kurtz is his name, he is the midget that dances in front of the bride." *A Simple Story*, 177.



story, Yitzhak's name derives from the laughter that his birth to such an old mother would provoke.<sup>14</sup> But such direct links to lexical meanings tend to loosen over time, as names are reused or passed on from one family member to another, and as descendants abandon the professions of their ancestors while keeping their names.

The 'meaning' of names, however, extends far beyond any lexical meaning they may possess. Otto Jespersen suggests that proper names are richer in connotations even than common nouns. How else, he asks, can we explain the process by which a proper name acquires a use as a common noun but to suppose that the proper name source (what I call the name-form) has a meaning?<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Paul Ziff contends that proper names have a connotation, which can be determined only by "considering the distribution of the name in the corpus". Ziff then suggests replacing the vague term 'connotation' with the more precise notion of a name's "information content".<sup>16</sup> The habitual use of a name as such may suggestively imply the bearer's gender, ethnicity, historical and geographical location, religious or political affiliation, etc.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the name Yitzhak is more likely to refer to a Jewish man than, say, a Buddhist woman. In this sense, 'Jewish'

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<sup>14</sup> Genesis 21:6 - "Now Sarah said, God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me".

<sup>15</sup> Otto Jespersen, *The Philosophy of Grammar* (New York: Norton, 1965), 66-67.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ziff, *Semantic Analysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1960), 93-97. On the richness of meaning of proper names, see also Katz, "A Proper Theory of Names"; J.M. Carroll, "Toward a Theory of Names and Naming", *Linguistics* 21 (1983): 341-371; Klaas Willems, "Form, Meaning and Reference in Natural Language: A Phenomenological Account of Proper Names", *Onoma* 35 (2000): 85-119. See also Willy Van Langendonck's formal categorization of the different kinds of meanings pertaining to names, which he calls: categorical, associative, emotive, and grammatical. Willy Van Langendonck, *Theory and Typology of Proper Names* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 85-86.

<sup>17</sup> This sort of connotation, which I refer to as the categorical connotation, distinctively belongs to the disciplinary domain of onomastics, and as I mentioned earlier, is widely ignored in most philosophical discussions, primarily because of the (false) analysis of names as given to a single bearer.

and 'man' may be considered part of the name's connotative meaning, which does not imply that a Christian man (or Buddhist woman for that matter) cannot also bear it. By contrast, since 'Yitzhak' has been used in Jewish communities in various periods and places, the name is relatively non-specific in its geographical and historical sense.<sup>18</sup>

A name's connotations may be said also to include the specific description or associations that emanate from a single bearer, for example the concepts of 'binding' and 'sacrifice' that attach to 'Yitzhak'. This sort of connotation is closely related, indeed almost identical, to the Fregean sense of names, but within the framework I propose it is but one component of the name's meaning. Such connotations are of course more easily acknowledged in cases involving legendary bearers, where an initially idiosyncratic description has become conventional, or widely spread. But the same mechanism is at work with every name and every bearer, even the relatively 'anonymous' ones, the only difference being in the scale of the context within which the connotation resonates.<sup>19</sup> An extreme example of the 'conventionalization' of an idiosyncratic sense is the case of Plato, in which the description of a single bearer has transformed into a lexical term ('platonic').

These seemingly distinct types of meaning are in fact intertwined in a dense network; indeed, they are interconnected with one another and, moreover, influence one another to such a degree that differentiating them is sustainable only for methodological purposes. The meanings of names are perpetually in flux, with new meanings gained and old ones shed on a regular basis. As

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<sup>18</sup> So is the name Tshortkover, which used to signify a congregational affiliation but later spread and was applied to bearers who are neither residents of Tshortkov nor even Tshortkov Hassids.

<sup>19</sup> See Ziff's elaborate discussion of the connotation of the name 'Witchgren', his made up cat. Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, 93-97.

names are given to particular bearers, these bearers leave their imprint on the name.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the account of a name as a peg on which the bearer's descriptions (or better, the connotations that attach to the bearer) are hung seems valid so long as we do not assume (as Searle implicitly does) that this peg is somehow 'reset' – that is, wiped clean or brought back to its initial state – each time the name is given to a new bearer; on the contrary, the peg must be assumed to be emphatically cumulative in nature. Saussure famously spoke of the paradoxical characteristic of language, its invariability and variability (sometimes translated as immutability and mutability), consisting in the fact that language is constantly changing, but no individual can change it.<sup>21</sup> We might say, then, that names are unique linguistic components in their high degree of mutability and inclination to change. Whenever a name is assigned to a bearer, it changes its meaning.

### 3.

Resisting the temptation to read the trajectory of Hirshl's argument as an allegory for his way of being in the world – his tendency to 'look the wrong way' when he seeks reassurance, his failure in moments of conflict to draw from his predicament the right conclusions, his inability to address

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, bearers do not only affect their name but are in turn affected by it. This notion will become central toward the end of this chapter and governs my reading in chapter 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (Illinois: Open court, 1986), 71-78.

complicated non-binary situations, etc. – I remain instead within the realm of proper names to suggest one possible explanation for Hirshl’s peculiar interest in them.

The morning after the Hanukah party that turned into an engagement party, Hirshl wakes in his bed and contemplates the events of the previous night. “After the deed there is nothing”, he says to himself, “what I need to do now is to take my mind off Blume and turn my heart over to my fiancée” (92). In the next passage, Hirshl tries and fails to execute the task he has just set himself. He recalls the party, and Mina, who saved him from his loneliness there, but soon enough his thoughts drift back to Blume: “Said Hirshl in his heart: all this is because **Blume reined herself**”, pronounced in Hebrew: *Bluma balma* (ibid).<sup>22</sup> Several critics have noted the double-sided meaning of Blume. On the one hand, in Hebrew it is the feminine adjective that derives from the root B.L.M, meaning to rein or to restrain in the active inflection and to be restrained, reserved, inhibited, in the passive form, as in Blume’s name. On the other hand, the German-Yiddish noun *blume* – flower – implies a blooming or a flourishing, for all of its renowned metaphorical baggage. However, no critical attention has been given to the fact that the work of interpreting Blume’s name is already performed within the novel, by Hirshl himself.

As if to refute the possibility that Hirshl’s play on Blume’s name is a meaningless linguistic ‘slip’, a similar thought recurs later on, in one of the chapters depicting his emotional downward spiral. Hirshl, by now married and suffering from deep melancholia, gets into the habit of paying evening visits to the house where Blume works, and lingering outside it. In one of the novel’s most

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<sup>22</sup> Halkin seems to have addressed Hirshl’s awareness to Blume’s name and its meaning but in another place in the text, right before the party instead of after it: “Dimly he felt that not she [Mina] but Blume was to blame”. The Hebrew text of this segment contains no pun. Halkin, *A Simple Story*, 51

poignant scenes, he pays Blume such a visit on a rainy night, and for once she emerges from the house and the two meet. Just before this brief encounter Hirshl reflects: “It is impossible that Blume will rein herself forever. Finally she is bound to come out” (152). Unlike the previous contemplation, which Hirshl “said in his heart”, this thought is not explicitly ascribed to him – as often happens in the novel, which makes subtle use of free indirect discourse with different levels of explicitness and decisiveness. The narrator’s statements can often be ascribed to the thoughts, feelings, or positions of a certain character who is proximately mentioned, or at least these statements provoke the question of whether they should be so interpreted. One of the most obvious examples of this principle is the statement introduced to justify the fact that Tsirl does not pay Blume a salary while she works as her servant. “What payment could Blume have expected? She has never served others, thus she is learning the house work from Tsirl and should be treated as a first year servant in a shop” (47). The fact that the narrator, and not Tsirl, is formally the source of this rationalization is precisely what charges it with such irony.<sup>23</sup> In the case of the reflection about the prospect of Blume emerging from the house as Hirshl waits outside, the use of the words “impossible” and “finally”, as well as the description, which immediately precedes this thought, of Hirshl pacing, marks it as a rather distinct case of inner contemplation.

In order to arrive at his conclusion that “Blume reined herself”, a diagnosis that conveniently clears him of all responsibility for the failure of their love, Hirshl conjugates Blume’s

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<sup>23</sup> Several critics have commented on this narratological device in *A Simple Story*. Malka Shaked in particular analyzes many such examples in her reading, which concentrates on the multiplicity of meanings and possible interpretations, especially of Hirshl’s madness. The tension created between competing readings of the same statement is often depicted by her as a source of irony. Malka Shaked “Ha’im Hirshl haya meshuga?” [Was Hirshl Mad?], in S.Y. Agnon *babikoret ha’ivrit* [S.Y. Agnon, Critical Essays on his Writing], vol. 2: Interpretation of his Novels, ed. Avinoam Barshai (Tel Aviv: Open University Press and Schocken, 1992), 115-33.

name in the active form, yielding an interpretation that is more damning than the passive meaning suggested by the name itself – namely being inhibited, shy, reserved. The meaning of the passive form is reinforced by Blume's surname, Nacht, whose combination with the given name suggests a night flower, which opens up only covertly, in the dark. In Hirshl's interpretation, by contrast, Blume knowingly and deliberately reined herself, a thesis that is consonant with his broader misconception of the events leading up to his engagement. From the moment Hirshl falls in love with Blume, he is preoccupied with issues of passivity, activity, and responsibility. The verb 'to do' recurs time and again in this context, as do cogitations about what should have and could have been done by Blume or himself. For instance: "He could have caressed her hair and taken her in his arms but he didn't do so, and when she took her hand out of his and ran away, he let her run" (62); or: "In Hirshl's love to Blume he expected to be encouraged by her, and she, not only does she not help him, she leaves him be" (75).

Thus, when Hirshl lies in bed and thinks, "Blume reined herself", just a few hours after his peculiar philosophical inquiry at the party, he is in fact resuming the same inquiry begun at the party, returning to his efforts to understand the appropriateness of names. This time his motives seem much clearer than they did the previous night, since he is contemplating the one name that he truly cares about, hence his contemplation is emotionally rather than philosophically driven.

But in insisting on ascribing a single, narrow description to Blume, one that unequivocally 'interprets' her and the nature of the relation between them, Hirshl overlooks the range of theoretical options that had unfolded before him during the party, as well as the particular complexities contained in the name Blume. First, he ignores his final conclusion that names and their bearers are completely disconnected, and that names "cannot be interpreted according to

their owners". Second, Hirshl forgets that a person has more than one attribute, and that the name doesn't always indicate the most predominant one. He seems, in other words, to fall back onto to his initial assumption of a straightforward accordance between name and bearer.

But Blume's polysemic name, a perfect instance of the heterogeneity of meaning, defies the kind of one-dimensional perception Hirshl tries to impose on it. If one expects, as Hirshl certainly does, that names should somehow fit the people who bear them, 'Blume' inherently conveys the potential for a complex character, a name-bearer who resists reduction to a single trait, and this, Hirshl is either unwilling or unable to acknowledge.

With its twofold meaning, Blume's name brings to the fore a further complicating factor that I have so far intentionally avoided, namely the intervention of language, translation, and verbal mediation. Unlike Agnon's many texts that foreground their own textuality, drawing deliberate attention to their linguistic texture, to the mediation of a fictional narrator and the fictional facet of the fiction, *A Simple Story* is one of Agnon's most realistic texts, and surely his most realistic novel. It purposely conceals such elements and invites its readers to suspend disbelief, to submerge themselves in the fictional world from a position of identification with its characters. In Miron's terms, Angon attempted in this novel to make his writing as 'transparent' as his unique style allowed, and to direct the reader's attention away from the narration and toward the narrated. To

Miron, the 'simplicity' of *A Simple Story* lies precisely here, in the direct, powerful, emotional link it forges with its readers.<sup>24</sup>

In Blume's name, however, the narration and the narrated forcefully collide. Hirshl of the narrated fictional world speaks, thinks, and feels in Yiddish. Though he has, like most Jewish men of his time, studied Hebrew Jewish texts and exegeses, and though his visits to the Zionist club in Shybusch also likely summoned encounters with modern Hebrew literature, still, Yiddish is his native language. Given the scarce appearances of the root B.L.M in the texts with which Hirshl is moderately acquainted, it is highly improbable that he would 'actually' make the intricate linguistic link between Blume's name and the verb 'to rein'.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the name's other meaning, of the flower, is entirely accessible and obvious to him. Like many of Agnon characters, Hirshl does not 'live' in the same language that he is written in. This discrepancy is indeed almost transparent until it comes to proper names, which are precisely that which "should remain untranslatable".<sup>26</sup> The name Blume stays the same (or nearly the same, at least phonologically) whether one reads the novel in Hebrew, German, or English. Thus, to gain access to the name's full meaning, the reader must engage in translation, regardless of which language the text is being read in, and even when reading a text that has already been translated.

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<sup>24</sup> Miron, *Harofe hamedume*, 161-63.

<sup>25</sup> *Blume balma* evokes Roman Jakobson's example of the formula *Traduttore, traditore*, which is deprived of its paronomastic value when translated into "the translator is a betrayer". Blume's name falls under Jakobson's definition of **paronomasia**, "a semantic confrontation of phonetically similar words irrespectively of any etymological connection", a phenomenon that "plays a considerable role in the life of language". Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987), 435; 423.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 105.



Derrida discussed the proper name Babel as an encapsulation of the simultaneous impossibility to translate names and imperative to do so. Babel, which, like Blume, can be ascribed two meanings in two languages (as Voltaire noticed) – ‘the city of God’, and ‘confusion’ (the confusion of tongues and the state of confusion in which the architects find themselves) – is the place where God punishes those people who desired to “make a name for themselves” by imposing his name, in that he “at the same time imposes and forbids translation”. The dual nature of the name Babel, which is at once “the reference of a pure signifier to a single being”, and “a common noun related to the generality of meaning”, is precisely that which situates the name, for Derrida, “on the edge of language”. Since a proper name “as such remains forever untranslatable”, it does not strictly belong, as other words do, to the system of language. But the name Babel, like Blume, not only possesses a translatable common meaning but indeed has more than one, in more than one language, and so “[i]t has for the translator no satisfactory solution”.<sup>27</sup> The name Babel, which means confusion in more than one way, is also intriguingly related to the name of the town where *A Simple Story* takes place: Shybush, which in Hebrew means distortion, and which is a distorted, confused form of Agnon’s home town of Buczacz.<sup>28</sup>

It is worth noting that the text does actually acknowledge the ‘flower’ interpretation of Blume’s name, when, early in the novel, the adolescent Hirshl first ‘discovers’ Blume and falls in love with her, prompting the narrator to observe that “Blume flourishes like the valley lily” (60). Unlike in the case of “*Blume balma*” (Blume reined herself), here the Hebrew wording gives no

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 104-109.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Shybush’ is also ‘a petty dime’ in Yiddish, and was often used as a diminutive – for example, a small town might be described as ‘the size of a shybush’.

indication of a phonetic affinity between the name and the description. The fact that the 'flourishing' and the 'lily' relate to the proper name remains completely mute, unless the Hebrew reader is aware of the meaning of Blume in German or Yiddish. As if to add one more layer of complexity, the text is deliberately ambiguous with respect to the status of this utterance and whether or not it should be ascribed to Hirshl's consciousness. As with other more overt cases of free indirect speech, it is impossible at this point in the narrative to determine whether this is Hirshl contemplating Blume's flourishing or else the narrator, throwing out a hint at his perceptive readers. Is the effort to interpret the name taking place within the fictional world, or is it just the reader who is invited to project the symbolic meaning of the flower onto the qualities of the character? Does Hirshl's later inability or obstinate refusal to take into consideration the flower interpretation, his insistence on interpreting the name only according to one covert meaning, force the reader to counter-interpret, to acknowledge the meaning that Hirshl would not?

Such a reading casts Blume's name, any name, as a gateway between one language and another, in both senses of this function: a place through which one passes but also where one is stopped, becomes aware of a barrier between two territories. This applies not only to the gateway between languages such as Hebrew and Yiddish, but also to the passage between the narration and the narrated,<sup>29</sup> placing names "at the edge of fiction", to paraphrase Derrida. Agnon gives Hirshl a lover whose name can be interpreted in more than one way but has him use only the one interpretation that is least probable for him. At the same time, he imposes and forbids translation,

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<sup>29</sup> Jakobson distinguished between three modes of translation – intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic, defining the latter as the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs from a nonverbal sign system. Perhaps this term can be borrowed in order to think of the intersection of the narrated and the narration. Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 429.

both on his readers and on his character. Until Hirshl contemplates Blume's name, it is possible for the reader to maintain the realistic novel's illusion that Hirshl is 'living' in Yiddish, or that he exists in a realm that is not fixed by language. But the un-translatable nature of proper names, which allows Hirshl to trespass his fictional linguistic borders, finally does away with the transparency of the narrative, and accentuates the materiality of the literary text.

#### 4.

Into this knot of questions about the meanings of a name, its accordance with the bearer, the relevant description of a person, and the status of these meanings in literature – a child is born. Like most babies, Hirshl and Mina's son does not have a name, and then he does. He is named.<sup>30</sup> Hirshl's question – what is the meaning of a name? – which hovered over the first part of the novel, now gives way to a close but fundamentally different question: what does it mean to give a name? The birth of the child occurs while Hirshl is staying in Doctor Langsam's clinic, where his parents hospitalize him after his mental breakdown. "Hirshl was informed that his son was born. A short telegram arrived from Shybush, ten words were in it, and it said Mina and her son are well" (185). At the end of the next chapter, after the narrator tells of Mina's inability to breastfeed the child (who is still called "her son"), the next paragraph begins thus:

Meshulam was circumcised on the thirtieth day because he was not healthy and they were afraid to circumcise him on time. The day he was circumcised was the day of his redemption. Since his father did not redeem him, a copper amulet was hung

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<sup>30</sup> This is Hirshl and Mina's first son, not the second child whose birth I describe at the top of the chapter.

around his neck with the letter *he* inscribed on it, to indicate that he owes five Shekels to a priest. (189)<sup>31</sup>

The child's name is casually, almost incidentally slipped into the text, and the narrator does not tell us who named him or why. The one thing that is made abundantly clear is who *did not* name him: his father, whose absence is stressed in the passage. Who named him then? And why? What is the meaning of his name? Does it fit him; is it 'right' for him?

The most self-evident answer to the first question is, Agnon. It is the author who names his characters, bestowing on them meaningful, interpretable names such as Blume and Meshulam. The answer to the second question – why was the boy so named – is also rather obvious given the distinct ironic meaning of the name. *Pidyon haben* (the redemption of the firstborn son) is a Jewish ritual performed when a firstborn son is 30 days old, and involves redeeming the infant from priestly duties by paying a Jewish priest, a *Kohen*, five Shekels.<sup>32</sup> Since Hirshl is absent on the 30<sup>th</sup> day, a sub-ritual is applied involving the hanging of the copper amulet with an inscription of the fifth letter in the Hebrew alphabet (also an abbreviation of God's name, and in addition, the first letter of Hirshl's name) to indicate that the child has yet to be paid for. The lexical meaning of 'Meshulam', on the other hand, is the passive present inflection of the verb to pay, meaning 'is paid for'.

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<sup>31</sup> Halkin's didactic translation aims to explain the rituals mentioned in this paragraph, adding his own words to Agnon's for the sake of readers unfamiliar with the ceremonies: "Meshulam was so frail at birth that he was not circumcised until the age of a month instead of the usual eight days. Being a firstborn son, he also had to be redeemed by his father from a kohen, a descendant of the priestly class, in accordance with the biblical rite. As Hirshl was not there to perform it, however, the child had a copper amulet with the letter *heh*, the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, hung around his neck to indicate that his father owed the kohen five gold crowns." Halkin, *A Simple Story*, 196.

<sup>32</sup> According to the law that is detailed already in the Pentateuch (Exodus, Numbers, and Leviticus).

If ever there was irony, this is it. The lexical meaning of the name clashes in the most obvious manner with the description of the child, producing a poignant opposition between the two. Another, more covert level of irony lies in the resemblance of the name Meshulam to the word *mushlam* – perfect, whole in all aspects (both words deriving from the same root) – whereas the boy is described as weak and sickly, that is, far from perfect, from the day he was born.

However, alongside the self-evident explanation that it is Agnon who has named the character, an entirely different level of the act of naming is at work here with regard to Meshulam. ‘The redemption of the son’ is not the only disrupted ritual that appears in this passage – there is also, first, the circumcision, postponed from the eighth day to the 30th due to the infant’s poor health. Though the Jewish custom of naming a boy upon his circumcision is not pointed out explicitly in the text, this may well provide at least one strong explanation for the fact that Meshulam’s name first appears here, of all places.<sup>33</sup> Whether he was named on the eighth day or the 30th,<sup>34</sup> it is clear that the child was named when his father was not at home to participate in his

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<sup>33</sup> Surprisingly, there is no formal Jewish law indicating that a boy should be named on the day of his circumcision. In the biblical story about the birth of Jacob and Esau, the latter, born first, is named before the second son emerges, holding his brother’s heel in his hand, hence his name, Jacob, derived from the Hebrew *akev*, meaning heel. This and similar stories suggest the practice of immediate naming upon a child’s birth. The custom of eighth-day naming is first mentioned in the New Testament in relation to the birth of John the Baptist: “And it came to pass that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father” (Luke 1:59, 21st Century King James Version). It is again mentioned upon the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:21). In Jewish sources this tradition is first mentioned in *Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer*, composed in the eighth century, in the context of the Birth of Moses, whose “Fathers [...] circumcised him to the eighth day and called his name Yekutiel” (*Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer*, 48). Lauterbach, *Studies in Jewish Law*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Munitz discusses the various contradicting Jewish traditions in such cases. Some encourage naming a child whose circumcision is postponed (so that people can pray for him, for example). Others require the parents to abstain from naming a child until circumcision, even when the child’s condition requires deferring his circumcision considerably. Sarah Munitz, “Shmot bnei adam: Minhag ve’halakhah” [People’s Names: Custom and Halakhah] (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 1989), 13-14.

naming, leaving the task to someone else, who remains unidentified. Borrowing Kripke's term, we may say that, in Meshulam's case, the "initial baptismal act", the most vital element of naming, is missing from the text even as the text emphasizes that it has indeed occurred.

The fact that the act of naming takes place on two levels, that the child is named twice, so to speak – once by Agnon and again within the fictional world – is ignored by Agnon's critics. One could say that for any named fictional character there is always an implied fictional moment of naming. Such an assertion is self-evident and nearly trivial: every narrative contains an infinite matrix of significant and insignificant implied fictional events (and who is to say which events belong in what category) that hover over the literary work, or over its reading, but are not explicitly narrated. Thus the naming of a fictional character as it occurs within the fictional world is typically a 'transparent' event, invisible and unrecounted. In *A Simple Story*, as in many of Agnon's texts, this is not the case. The explicit references to Hirshl's naming and later to Meshulam's, as well as the unarticulated name of the second child, emphasize the fictional mode of naming. In Meshulam's case this is enhanced by his father's peculiar interest in names and their workings. Hirshl's curiosity, together with the fact that children are commonly named by their parents, both direct a spotlight at the moment of the child's naming. Although it is still only implied at this point in the text, the naming moment is already not invisible.

Why, on the fictional level, was the child named Meshulam? Who named him so? The ironic explanation does not apply here. Once again, the proper name is the place where the narrative and the narrated clash, the tension resurfacing between the way the name is understood by the readers

of the literary text and the way the fictional characters understand it. Whereas reading may ascribe irony, symbolism, and metaphoricity to the literary name-giving, a different set of motivations is evoked for the parallel fictional act, the former's irony becoming the latter's failure to give a pertinent name, its symbolism becoming mysticism. Thus, the same discrepancy between the name's meaning and the boy's description that invites the ascription of an ironic literary intention would probably be designated by Hirshl as yet another failure of a name to properly signify its bearer.

The text does offer a mundane explanation for the naming of the baby: he was named after Baruch Meir's brother, Meshulam. This character was already briefly mentioned in the chapter that tells of Hirshl and Mina's wedding. Unlike Mina's parents, the Ziemlichs, who covered the travel expenses of their indigent relatives, bought them new clothes, and even bought a gift in their name, the Hurvitzs did not display such generosity, and so Meshulam, Baruch Meir's brother, who is a small unsuccessful merchant, does not attend. Nevertheless, Meshulam sends the young couple a present, a one dollar bill along with a few lines of his own poetry, in which his name is accentuated as such. The small poem dedicated to Hirshl and Mina becomes famous in town, receiving various interpretations, especially concerning Meshulam's reason for choosing to open his poem with the letter M. "Some said, because it is the first letter of Mina. Some said, because it is the first letter of *mazal tov*. Others said, neither is right, he wished to fix his name at the head of each line. Well then, where is the final M of Meshulam, he put it at the end of the greeting".<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Meshulam's acronymic poem consists of six lines. The four opening letters of the first four lines are the first letters of Meshulam's name in Hebrew (spelled with five letters). The last M doesn't appear at the head of either of the remaining

This uncle, a seemingly peripheral character, is the focal point of Nitza Ben-Dov's essay "The Palm and the Fingers: Between Madness and Poetry", in which she suggests that the limited space allotted to the poet uncle in Hirshl's home and consciousness, as well as in the text, does not negate the character's relevance, and that this character can retrospectively enable a different understanding of the text's main conflict and its closure.<sup>36</sup>

Meshulam the uncle is mentioned on three brief occasions throughout the novel. The first is the wedding scene; the second takes place when Baruch Meir thinks of him during his train ride to Lemberg to bring Hirshl back home from the clinic; the third is when Hirshl and Mina visit their son in the country, where the baby was sent to live with Mina's parents. Only in this last episode, close to the novel's end (chapter 36 of 37) does the narrator note explicitly, though still in passing, that the child was named after his father's uncle.

The fact that Meshulam the uncle is mentioned only three times, Ben-Dov observes, stands in contrast to the considerable number of references to Hirshl's other uncle, Tsirl's brother, who lost his mind and died. This contrast sets off Ben-Dov's psychoanalytical reading, which conceives of the two uncles as two vying options in Hirshl's psyche. The outlet from reality suggested to Hirshl by the insane uncle is substituted by a different outlet subtly implied already in the other uncle's gift of a one dollar bill and a poem: a physical escape, to America, or a poetical, creative outlet into "the

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two lines, but rather at the very end of the second one, thus closing the poem. Halkin's translation of the poem, based only loosely on the Hebrew, is designed to emulate this structural principle: "Many a mile came this dollar, / E'en from a distant land. / Share its good luck with each other, / Underwritten by my hand. / Long may you be happy together, / And remember me, for I am, / Your Uncle Meshulam." Halkin, *A Simple Story*, 102.

<sup>36</sup> Nitza Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo me'usharot: Tiscul eroti, omanut umavet beytzirat Agnon* [Unhappy / Unapproved Loves: Erotic Frustration, Art and Death in Agnon's Fiction] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), 199-238.



depth of the soul” and “the fountain of poetry and creativity” accessed by releasing the repressed “spiritual spark” that exists within him. According to the trajectory that Ben-Dov draws, the young Hirshl, who is intimately attached to his mother’s family, identifies with his insane dead uncle. As the years pass, he begins relating to his father’s side, and is exposed to his father’s brother. Only two poems appear in the novel, the uncle’s, and the one that Hirshl sings to his son Meshulam when he visits him.<sup>37</sup> For Ben-Dov, this signifies a poetical heritage that passes in the family. Hirshl’s name (given after his mother’s father) and his madness all but seal the impression that he is an organic outcome of his mother’s family, but to Ben-Dov, the narrator’s statement that Hirshl, singing to his son, “does not possess even a spark of his uncle Meshulam” (211) is simply not true. Meshulam the uncle and Meshulam the baby, named after him, both represent the part in Hirshl that denied him peaceful existence: the poetical, sensitive, fragile side, which is irreparably at odds with the bourgeois norms of his family.<sup>38</sup>

While Ben-Dov’s elaborate reading of the two Meshulams bestows on these characters the interpretative attention they long deserved, I am reluctant to embrace fully several of her observations, and especially her binary psychoanalytical perception of the maternal and the paternal pole, each of which, in my view, already carries its own interruptions and contradicting elements.<sup>39</sup> More closely related to my own present interest, Ben-Dov’s reading, with its focus on

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<sup>37</sup> As Ben-Dov also further observes, in both these poems the name Meshulam is accentuated. Ibid, 229-30.

<sup>38</sup> Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo me’usharot*, 217-239. Ben-Dov concentrates not only on the uncle and his poetic heritage but also on the recurring motif of the blind singing panhandler, whom she sees as an external displaced projection of this same aching singing aspect of Hirshl’s personality.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, Gershon Shaked writes of Tsirl’s insane brother: “This character reminds the reader that at the very heart of the bourgeois circle, its own contradiction exists”. Shaked, *Omanut hasipur*, 109.

the emotional world of the fictional characters and its interpretations of their names as a symbolic reflection of their personality, overlooks the fictional world as an arena in which naming 'actually' takes place.

## 5.

Immediately following the passage that tells of the delayed and disrupted rituals and reveals Meshulam's name, a letter arrives from Doctor Langsam to Hirshl's parents notifying them that he is ready to return home, and Baruch Meir sets out on his way to fetch his son from Lemberg. At one of the train's stations, a soldier enters the car where Baruch Meir has so far been seated alone, and sits across from him. Baruch Meir strikes up a courteous conversation, offering that the summer has passed. The soldier, in a gesture that will soon turn out to be typical, responds "yes sir". After a short dialogue of sorts about the weather, consisting in several more remarks by Baruch Meir and several more 'yes sir's by the soldier, the conversation takes an intriguing turn:

Baruch Meir asked the soldier, How are you Nikofar?

Answered the soldier, Praise the Lord, I am well sir.

Said Baruch Meir, Don't you wonder Nikofar that I know your name Nikofar.

Answered the soldier, Yes sir.

Said Baruch Meir, Tell me Nikofar, how do I know that your name is Nikofar, I have never seen you before.

Answered the soldier, Yes sir.

Said Baruch Meir, Yes sir, Yes sir, Yes sir. You would do better to ask me how I know that your name is Nikofar.

Asked the soldier, How does sir know that my name is Nikofar.

Said Baruch Meir, I guessed, Nikofar, I guessed.

Said the soldier, But my name is not Nikofar.

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What is your name then?  
 Said the soldier, If sir can guess, let him guess.  
 Said Baruch Meir, you are a joker, Ivan.  
 Said the soldier, Ivan is not my name.  
 What is your name then? Stepan?  
 Guess, sir, guess.  
 Said Baruch Meir, Do you think Petri that I have nothing better to do than to guess your name.  
 Yes sir.  
 Said Baruch Meir, Then you are wrong Andre.  
 Immediately he opened his book to say his prayers. The soldier stretched out on the bench, closed his eyes and started snoring. (190-91)

This peculiar dialogue, the subject of virtually no interpretative attention, is followed by another rarely discussed incident. After the soldier falls asleep, leaving the readers and Baruch Meir ignorant of his real name, Baruch Meir is once again on his own, his mind drifting toward melancholy thoughts. Just as he intends to go to sleep himself, several people enter the train car.

One of them resembled Meshulam his brother, or perhaps Baruch Meir imagined that he resembled his brother. He started pondering the fact that they have not seen each other and written to each other in ten years, except for once a year when the one sent the other a new-year's card and the other sent him a rhymed greeting. I believe Meshulam's children are already grown up, if I am not mistaken he has a daughter to wed. [...] Why am I thinking of my brother all of a sudden, that man does not resemble my brother at all. (192)

Why would Baruch Meir, in a relatively troubled state, heading to fetch his mentally fragile son, engage in such a 'playful' conversation with a strange man, a soldier? Why the need to prove that he can guess the soldier's name? And why, all of a sudden, does he recall his brother? The reminiscence is clearly not stirred by the new passenger, as the excuse of his resemblance to Meshulam is subverted twice. First, it is subverted by the narrator, who, having just stated that "one of them resembled Meshulam", adds the seemingly redundant and atypical remark: "or perhaps Baruch Meir imagined that he resembled his brother". The novel's frequent use of free indirect speech in itself already strongly encourages a reading of the first statement as a reflection

of Baruch Meir's perception, but here the narrator does not leave it at that, instead explicitly suggesting to the readers that the alleged resemblance is a figment of Baruch Meir's imagination. Then the resemblance is subverted again, this time by Baruch Meir himself, who refutes the physical likeness in a direct citation: "that man does not resemble my brother at all." Hence, the double refutation of the resemblance leaves Baruch Meir's remembering of his brother unexplained.

This scene, the second of the three scenes throughout the novel in which Meshulam the uncle is mentioned, is the only one in which his name qua name is not discussed, as it is in the passages involving the wedding gift and the naming of the baby. Yet here, of all places, the issue of the name as such is most resonant insofar as it charges the quandary "why am I thinking of my brother" with irony. Baruch Meir may not be able to make the link himself, or he may believe that it was an accidental result of the false resemblance. One can also ascribe the sudden evocation of the brother to a psychological and narratological motive, as Ben-Dov does: "This resemblance, which immediately turns out to be false, only comes in order to draw Meshulam from oblivion, from Baruch Meir's sub-conscious and at the same time from the bottom of the story, and link it with this journey of self examination".<sup>40</sup> But Baruch Meir does not require any such coincidence to conjure up his brother, and his reason for remembering him is much more concrete: his first grandson has just been named after Meshulam, and it is probably Baruch Meir himself, or perhaps his wife, who chose the name.

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<sup>40</sup> Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo me'usharot*, 223-24.

Both the conversation with the soldier and the remembering of the brother are related to this recent act of naming. The strange dialogue-monologue with the soldier appears in this light as a desperate attempt to prove to himself that he is proficient in the art of naming: that he can come up with the right name, the proper name, even for someone he has just met. And the remembering of the brother is self-evident in the context of having named the baby after him. But why can't Baruch Meir accomplish this understanding himself? Why does he need to resort to the false excuse of the seemingly similar man in the train car?

Meshulam the baby was *not* properly named, in more ways than one: his father's absence at the time of naming, the delayed circumcision that probably delayed the name giving, and even the inadequacy of the meanings of 'Meshulam' for the 'imperfect' child who has not been 'paid for'. But the most drastic impropriety is directly related to Baruch Meir's brother: naming a child after a living relative is a transgressive act, almost unheard of among East-European Jewish communities, where newborn children were normally named after deceased relatives.<sup>41</sup> As Lauterbach explains, in biblical times children were not named after any ancestors, living or dead, since this was taken to imply a transferring of the very being or individuality of the person whose name was given to another, resulting in his ceasing to exist, or in the case of a deceased ancestor, in the annihilation of his memory. In the Talmudic period this notion was abandoned altogether, or rather turned on its head as a result of the penetration of foreign customs, and children began to be named after both

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<sup>41</sup> Kaganoff, *Dictionary of Jewish Names*, 12. In *Ha'esh v'ha'etzim* [The Fire and the Wood], Agnon depicts a conversation between Rabbi Avraham and Rabbi Yaakov about the former's father, Rabbi Yudel. Rabbi Avraham is required to explain to his interlocutor the unusual fact that his father was named after a relative who was still alive at the time: "[My father's] name is also Rabbi Yudel. And he was born during the lifetime of our ancestor Rabbi Yudel Hassid, and how did they name him after that man, does one call a child after a living relative? This is how the story goes...". Agnon, *Ha'esh v'ha'etzim* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 136.

living and deceased ancestors<sup>42</sup> in the belief that the memory of the ancestor is thereby preserved and kept alive. Later still, the custom underwent another transformation, mainly among Ashkenazic Jews, who began naming their children only after deceased relatives, mainly out of fear that if the child bears the name of a living relative, the angel of death may mistakenly take the child instead of elderly kin, or else that the child may mistakenly receive some sickness or other punishment intended for the older relation. But there is another driving force behind the reluctance to name after the living, one that stems from the original custom that utterly forbids naming-after, and that is the belief that a name, which is identified with the soul, cannot occupy two bodies simultaneously.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, for this reason naming a child after a living kin was perceived as an act of hostility, a deliberate attempt to hasten the death of the named-after relation.<sup>44</sup>

Within this intricate and evolving perception of naming, two notions emphatically emerge: name as memory, a notion addressed in my reading in the previous chapter, and the idea of naming as a potential act of hostility, which governs my reading in the subsequent one. The act of naming Baruch Meir's grandson after the former's living brother is an amalgam of both notions. The exceptional, unorthodox decision to name the child Meshulam while a close relative by this name is still alive is (in typical fashion) not explicitly explained in the novel, yet the entire scene on the train,

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<sup>42</sup> And also, in some cases, friends or people to whom the parents wanted to show their respect or gratitude.

<sup>43</sup> Lauterbach, *Studies in Jewish Law*, 30-54.

<sup>44</sup> Munitz, "Shmot bnei adam", 59-61. In the rare case in which permission was given by the name bearer, a child could be named after him. This is obviously not the case with Baruch Meir and Meshulam, as the two brothers have not spoken in ten years, only exchanging annual formal greetings.

including the dialogue with the soldier and the recollection of the brother, is illuminated when read in view of this decision.

In the story that his conscious mind tells him, Baruch Meir hardly remembers or indeed knows his brother – a state of affairs that would appear to make the naming-after insignificant, an empty gesture. In what emerges as a highly paradoxical moment, Baruch Meir, in naming his grandson after his brother, employs a distinct apparatus of memory preservation, of commemoration; but in order to do so, he convinces himself that he has virtually forgotten his brother. He may tell himself that ‘Meshulam’ was just an arbitrary choice of name for his grandson, no more significant than his choice of Nikofar or Stepan for the soldier, but the train of his thought, which leads directly to the brother, suggests otherwise.

The false ‘recognition’ of the brother in a man who does not resemble him indicates that Meshulam is very much on Baruch Meir’s mind, and perhaps that he perceives that naming the child after him was terribly wrong. Moreover, what little knowledge Baruch Meir does possess about his brother is not trivial, despite the casualness of his articulation of the thought (“I believe Meshulam’s children are already grown up, If I am not mistaken he has a daughter to wed”). These bits of information are highly relevant for him, not so much in relation to the baby but in the comparison they form between the two siblings. Baruch Meir, supposedly the successful brother, married ‘above himself’ and improved his economic and social status. But as it turned out, in addition to her material wealth Tsirl also brought to the marriage her impaired heredity, the insanity, and the marriage eventually yielded only one child who is mentally ill and physically weak. Baruch Meir’s indigent brother, meanwhile, raised several healthy children, now grown up and leading independent lives, rendering Meshulam the truly successful sibling in Baruch Meir’s eyes.

Whether or it was envy that motivated the naming of the child after the brother (either for 'good reasons', i.e. to bring the brother's luck upon the child, or for 'bad' ones – an expression of resentment) – the mere use of the name of a living person for a newborn is, by Baruch Meir's cultural standards, an act of hostility. He and Tsirl, knowing the significance of their act of naming, in effect take advantage of Meshulam, who is not in touch with them and cannot contest their decision.

This hostility translates into another hostile gesture that revolves around names – those that Baruch Meir calls the soldier. In his ostensibly playful, self-amused engagement in guessing the soldier's name, he is misnaming the soldier, wrongfully calling him by names that are not his. The names themselves are 'probable' insofar as they are all male Christian Ruthenian prototypical names – Baruch Meir's selection being based on what I have called the categorical connotation – and in this sense they are not entirely unmotivated. Nor are they, in themselves, in any way offensive. Yet his very presumption to know the passenger's name based on nothing but his outer appearance and the limited information it provides (namely, that he is a gentile soldier) is already rather insulting. There is an undeniable derogatory undertone to Baruch Meir's exchange with the gentile soldier, implying as it does a limited scope of potential names and by extension of cultural and human existence in general. Baruch Meir may appear to be reconstructing Hirshl's attempt to discover the accordance between names and bearers, but unlike Hirshl's theoretical musings upon the propriety of existing name-bearer couplings, Baruch Meir assumes the highly questionable ability to *give* someone his proper name, and in doing so, misnames him.



## 6.

Meshulam's name is already a fait accompli when Hirshl returns home from the clinic, yet Hirshl himself doesn't use his son's name until much later. This applies not only to direct references but to all cases in which the text implies some form of adherence to Hirshl's thought or feelings. "When Hirshl entered his home Mina welcomed him with a baby in her hands, folded in a white pillow like some red whining steak. Hirshl greeted his wife and turned away from his son. Just as his heart had not opened up to love him on the day he was born, so it did not open up as he stood before him" (194). Soon, Hirshl's attitude toward his son improves, the references to 'a baby' or 'that baby' evolving into 'the baby' or even 'his son' when the child is mentioned in relation to his father.

Though he appears to be adjusting to his new life, Hirshl is prone to 'what if' imaginations: fantasizing of Mina's death, which would force him to re-marry and force Blume to marry him, if not for love then for pity.

[H]e pitied himself and his son who would be left a motherless orphan. Hirshl became fond of this word, orphan. Many times he called his son my orphan. When Mina first heard Hirshl calling Meshulam<sup>45</sup> my orphan a shiver went through her spine. [...] Every time she heard the name orphan in relation to her son her entire soul shuddered. Hirshl surely did not intend to cast the evil eye, rather a word fell into his mouth and he grew fond of it. (207)

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<sup>45</sup> Only when the text shifts from Hirshl's to Mina's thoughts is the child called Meshulam.

Addressing his son for the first time in the text, Hirshl chooses the paradoxical byname “my orphan”.<sup>46</sup> Even though Hirshl overtly refers to Mina’s future absence and not his own current absence, still, the joining of ‘orphan’ to the pronoun ‘my’ suggests an oxymoron.

Meshulam’s byname, like many bynames, points to some shortcoming in the formal name’s ability to rightfully signify the bearer. “By giving names, parents dedicate their children to God,” writes Walter Benjamin, “the names they give do not correspond – in a metaphysical rather than etymological sense – to any knowledge, for they name newborn children. In a strict sense, no name ought (in its etymological meaning) to correspond to any person, for the proper name is the word of God in human sounds”.<sup>47</sup> Benjamin’s mystical understanding of the ‘correctness’ of names is grounded in a pragmatic consideration: the simple fact that when newborns are named their parents have little knowledge about them. This leads him to repudiate the etymological (or lexical) connection between name and bearer. Yet often this lack of knowledge, in combination with the expectation that names should indeed fit their bearers, leads to the substitution of formal names with bynames that are perceived as more ‘correct’.<sup>48</sup> “What happens,” asks Derrida, “above all, when it is necessary to sur-name (*surnommer*), re-naming there where, precisely, the name comes to be found lacking?”<sup>49</sup> In Meshulam’s case, the name was improperly given in Hirshl’s absence, and

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<sup>46</sup> In Hebrew, since the pronoun ‘my’ is a suffix that adheres to the word orphan, turning *yatom* into *yetomi*, the result is more ‘namelike’.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man”, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 69.

<sup>48</sup> See my discussion of bynames in the next chapter, section 5.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), xiv. The quote is taken from the four-page insert added to each of the three books: *Passions*, *Sauf le nom*, and *Kohra*, which were

it is a disrupted name, lacking in more ways than one. Hirshl thus rejects the formal name given to his son by others, and comes up with a byname that, intriguingly and rather originally, signifies not a present accordance but a future one.

And indeed, the ‘erroneous’ byname referring to an absent parent later becomes adequate (even if not in the way that Hirshl imagined), in what may be perceived as a transformative operation of a name, typical of Agnon’s names (this kind of operation is the focus of my next chapter). In the subsequent paragraph, the deterioration in the baby’s health is described in detail until finally he is sent to live with Mina’s parents in the country, leaving his parents childless as they were before his birth. It is on the night after Meshulam is sent away that they reach their most idyllic, erotic moment, which perhaps results in the birth of their second son. Another result of Meshulam’s departure is that Hirshl starts to use his son’s name. The second and last time Hirshl directly addresses his son in the novel occurs during a visit to the country, when Hirshl sings him a song he composed for him.

Even a tiny sparkle of his uncle Meshulam whom the baby is named after did not exist in Hirshl. Nonetheless he was able to make up a poem for his son’s sake, and so he stood above him and sang<sup>50</sup>

Angels standing on a ladder,  
 Bringing a gift to my son, to Meshulam  
 What do they bring, a brother or sister,

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published separately in France and joined into a single book in the English edition. The translator’s note indicates the difficulty involved in translating the French *surnom*, which is much closer to the English ‘nickname’ or ‘byname’ than it is to ‘surname’, hence the decision to translate it as ‘sur-name’ “with the hyphen serving to call attention to the sur-name’ as the ‘supplemental name’ that any surname in fact is” (Ibid, x). As I mentioned earlier, Genette contends that “the eponymy of names lies in its value as a nickname”: the agreement or correctness of a name is thus primarily perceived as a characteristic of a nickname. Genette, *Mimologics*, 16-17.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Poem’ and ‘song’ are designated by the same word in Hebrew: *shir*. ‘For his sake’, literally translates: ‘for his name’.

He and I will have plenty of joys

Schiller said it well, who didn't write poems in his youth. Perhaps Schiller did not refer to such a poem, at any rate, this poem is better than the epithet orphan that Hirshl used to call his son. (211)

The naming of the baby after the uncle is finally spelled out, and concomitantly the name 'my orphan' is substituted with the poem, in which Meshulam is addressed by his father for the first and last time with his formal name. The free play of names, perpetually substituting for each other, is manifested in a circular structure: Meshulam the uncle worked his name into an acronymic poem and sent it to Hirshl, whose son was then wrongfully named after Meshulam; then the wrong name was substituted by the byname 'my orphan', and later, when the child is virtually 'orphaned' – sent away from his parents – the byname is reverted 'back' by the poem, consisting of the formal name substituted by a name-within-a-poem. Hirshl may have given up on the disturbing name 'my orphan', but he does so only once the child is already indeed all but orphaned, paradoxically forsaking the byname at the precise moment when it proves its pertinence.<sup>51</sup>

Meshulam's banishment from the house makes room for authentic feelings of affection between Hirshl and Mina, reinforcing the general impression of Hirshl's well-being at his work in the store and among his friends in Shybush. As a second, healthy child is born, a child that, unlike his brother, will remain with his parents, the text reaches its closure, announced explicitly by the

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<sup>51</sup> The passage quoted above is followed by an awkward description: "Hirshl does no play with his son all day long. Sometimes he goes out to the yard and hangs around. Stach attends to the horses as usual, and tickles the dogs. The dogs are not annoyed with Atzmoni – this is the name they call Stach because of the metal plates in his shoes" (211). Thus, the forsaken byname 'my orphan' is not the only byname in the novel: even the dogs in the Ziemlich yard 'correct' the horseman's formal name, Stach, 'sur-naming' him with an epithet that refers to his power and violence.

narrator and qualified only by the remark about Blume's story that is yet to be told. This closure has been the subject of an ongoing critical debate, governed by two fundamental questions. First, How truly 'closed' is the novel's closure? Are we to assume that Hirshl's life will indeed continue more or less in the relaxed, moderate state in which the text leaves him? And second (a question posed in more and less explicit forms), Does *A Simple Story* have a 'happy ending'?

One of the first and most assertive voices to answer the latter question with a resounding No was that of Gershon Shaked. In his reading, Hirshl, after returning from Doctor Langsam's clinic, "no longer demands a place of his own. [...] Instead, he adapts his being to every situation. His claim, originating in the world of his soul, has become routinized and subject to derision".<sup>52</sup> Shaked maintains that Hirshl's personality and his dreams are overcome by the Jewish bourgeois society that forces itself upon him. Distinguishing between the literary outcome of the novel and Agnon's stance toward it, Shaked asserts that "The author views this as an ironic victory, and he condemns it. Thus, the author's attitude is revolutionary – that is, opposed to the plot – and he condemns the victory that he himself arranged".<sup>53</sup>

Not all critics have accepted the dim portrayal of the novel's outcome. In his essay on "The Plot's Denouement Point as Key to Interpretation of the Literary Work", Avraham B. Yehoshua defines the purpose of his reading as "proving through the text that Hirshl and Mina achieve true love relations by the end of the novel". And indeed, he contends that Hirshl's attempt to find new

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<sup>52</sup> Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York and London: New York University Press, 1989), 131-32.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

balance finally results “not only in an acceptance of reality but also in the building of a life that seems happy”.<sup>54</sup> According to Amos Oz, who offers a corresponding if far more radical reading of the novel’s ending, the story is resolved with the forging of a secret and erotic alliance between Hirshl and Mina.<sup>55</sup> Such an alliance becomes possible after prolonged blindness, when Hirshl finally sees Blume’s “barrenness” and “the sexual and emotional coldness that emanate from her”. Only then can he identify Blume not as his mother’s opposite but as her double, “a citizen of the love desert of those who indulge in narrow minded calculations”.<sup>56</sup>

Contradicting as these various readings may be, they all share the understanding that the novel leaves its characters in a state of equilibrium, and that it achieves unequivocal closure. Responding to these latter interpretations, Ben-Dov explicitly asks: “Does A Simple Story indeed have a happy ending?” To her, Hirshl’s conformity and his surrender to Tsirl at the end of the novel are reflected not only in his succumbing to the convenient life with Mina but especially in his choice to give up the spark, the world of poetry. According to Ben-Dov, the novel’s ending amounts to a “ticking time bomb” for Hirshl, and she ‘predicts’ that Meshulam the son, who is “a biological-human incarnation of Hirshl’s aching and singing personality”, will eventually return to the house and pass on the poetry he inherited to the next generations.<sup>57</sup> Malka Shaked points to two competing readings of the ending, which she views as equally valid: either Hirshl indeed overcame

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<sup>54</sup> Avraham B. Yehoshua, “Nekudat hahatarah ba’alila kemaft’e’ah leferush hayetzira” [The Plot’s Denouement as a Key for Interpretation], in *Agnon babikoret*, ed. Barshai, 108.

<sup>55</sup> Amos Oz, *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon’s Fear of God* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 59.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>57</sup> Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo me’usharot*, 201-203, 236.

his madness and became a happy, settled man, or else he is in fact unhappy, in which case there is no telling if and for how long he has overcome his madness. Both readings can be legitimately inferred from the narrator's stand, depending on how one reads his often equivocal statements – literally, or as a parody that undermines literal meaning.<sup>58</sup> Miron views the 'catharsis' of the ending as parodic or imaginary, since it replaces the tranquility that follows purification with that which comes from immersion in a shallow existence. His interpretation questions the conclusiveness of the closure, suggesting that the tepid family happiness Hirshl attains by repressing his true feelings is perhaps not the final stage of his emotional evolution.<sup>59</sup>

I return now to the passages that tell of the second child's birth, this time quoting in full:

Meshulam's brother came into the world with a smile on his face. His body was healthy and his organs intact.<sup>60</sup> Even his mother recuperated and was made whole by him. A thousand joys he brought his parents,<sup>61</sup> and a thousand names they called him, with every day that God created he created a new name. Some names have a meaning,<sup>62</sup> some do not. So many names they called him that his crib name was forgotten.

A thousand names they called that baby and a thousand times a day his parents come to see him, standing at his crib side and counting his talents. Here he smiles,

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<sup>58</sup> Malka Shaked, "Ha'im Hirshl haya", 133.

<sup>59</sup> Miron, *Harofe hamedume*, 235, 173. Miron examines the question of closure and the ending of *A Simple Story* as providing a vantage point on an entire set of psychological, ideological, and literary questions that pertain to Agnon's work in general. Elsewhere, Miron discusses Agnon's chronic difficulties with the closing of his novels, leading him either to fantastic endings or to weak and partial endings he himself described as problematic. See: Dan Miron, "Domesticating a Foreign Genre: Agnon's Transactions with the Novel", *Prooftext* 7 (1987): 1-27,

<sup>60</sup> In Hebrew: *mushalm* (perfect).

<sup>61</sup> In Hebrew: *avotav*, literally meaning 'his ancestors'.

<sup>62</sup> Literally, the text says 'interpretation' (*perush*) rather than 'meaning'. The remark about the names that have meaning and those that do not seems to refer directly back to Hirshl's thoughts at the party, discussed in detail at the beginning of the chapter.

here he sneezes, did you see his nose, see how he moves his lips, this clever one understands everything that is said, Oy. His ear was creased on his pillow. (213-14)

The drama of naming teeming just below the surface throughout the novel now reaches its climax. Following these passages is the famous dialogue between Hirshl and Mina, standing over the child's crib and debating whether "love cannot be divided in two," and "comes if there is no one separating it from us", as Hirshl asserts, or whether, as Mina offers, it "grows with each and every one". Along with the narrator's ironic comment that "God in heaven knows that Hirshl did not mean anything but that baby" (*ibid*), this final exchange between the couple received ample critical attention, leaving the nameless baby largely unattended.

One critic who did pay some attention to the baby's multiple names is Gershon Shaked, who identifies two main 'linguistic conventions' that recur throughout the text, taking on different meanings in different contexts. These are the phrases "God in heaven", and "a thousand years/things/times". The latter, a conventional formula of exaggeration, is used primarily to intensify an emotional element, implying that behind the quotidian reality and social disguises of the characters lie other, greater things, which are 'above and beyond' the mind's reach. Shaked examines the occurrences of this idiom in several selected contexts, among them one of the most beautiful scenes of love of the novel and perhaps of Agnon's fiction, in which Hirshl visits Blume's room and, thinking that he is alone there, lies in her bed. "A thousand years Hirshl's head rested on Blume's bed. The entire universe was erased. Only Hirshl alone existed" (65). The conventionality of the convention, Shaked contends, is countervailed by the opposition, expressed through the "thousand years", between the intensified 'experience time' and the physical time. Similarly, in the case of the "thousand things" Hirshl wishes to tell Blume just before she is driven out of the house,



the expression is used to emphasize the contrast between the protagonist's emotional experience and the social conventions that restrict him. However, when Shaked reaches the final appearance of the "one thousand" convention (in the passage quoted above), he withdraws from his own interpretative line. Four times does the word appear here: "a thousand joys"; "a thousand times"; and twice "a thousand names". This time, Shaked argues, the convention is stripped of its emotional aspect. "The trivial meaning of the number 'one thousand' is not necessitated by the names to which it is attached, but from the full context – the trivial circumstances of the bourgeois family. [...] Unlike previous contexts, this last one is a kind of parody on the emotional use of the combination 'one thousand'". Incorporating the reading of the 'one thousand' convention into his overall interpretation, Shaked concludes that the convention undergoes an evolution that is typical of the novel, just like the character who wishes to break boundaries and briefly succeeds in doing so, only to return defeated to his habitat: the bourgeois life.<sup>63</sup>

With respect to these paragraphs and to the practice of naming, I suggest however that they are in fact of a piece with Shaked's overall interpretive line rather than a deviation from it. The dissonance created by the 'one thousand' convention at this particular juncture – that is, the dissonance between the opulence of the number and the limited nature of that which it actually represents – is among the novel's most extreme manifestations of an ironic gap. Moreover, I propose that Hirshl's alleged total submission at the text's end is not necessarily as hermetic as it may appear.

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<sup>63</sup> Shaked, *Omanut hasipur*, 214-16.

The new baby, who substitutes for his exiled 'defective' brother, is perfect (*mushlam*), and so the elder brother's name, which was at least partially ironic as applied to him, now accurately captures a characteristic of the newborn. But this characteristic, indeed all the newborn's traits, have no corresponding name, at least as far as the reader of the novel is concerned. "A thousand names" the baby is called, we are told twice, yet not a single name is mentioned. The given name ("crib name") is forgotten or sinks, just like Hirshl's given name, 'Shimon'. But whereas Hirshl's forgotten name was specified in the text, the newborn's is not. With the name 'Shimon', the omniscient narrator distinguished himself from the fictional world – he remembers the forgotten name – but here he participates in the forgetting and indeed intensifies it by not allowing the name to be remembered through the text. Furthermore, Hirshl is a grown man when the transformation in both his names is described; but the child portrayed here is still in his crib when his crib name sinks into oblivion.

From the very outset of *A Simple Story*, names change: some are forgotten, some are altered, some substituted by other names. With Mina and Hirshl's second son, however, this mechanism is taken to an extreme. The baby may possess "a thousand names", but as far as the narrative goes, he has none, is left nameless. The forgetting of a name that has just been given seems dubious: purposeful rather than accidental. And the failure to mention the name, occurring in a text that is preoccupied with naming, can hardly be understood as mere neglect, especially given the fact that the noun 'name' appears seven times in these few lines. On the contrary, it seems that special care was taken to avoid revealing any of the thousand names the baby was called, and particularly not his given name.

Just as I asked earlier who named Meshulam, and proposed that he was named (at least) twice, by Agnon and by his grandparents, it is only reasonable to ask who is it that deliberately forgets his newborn brother's name, who overnames the child, replacing the forgotten name with a thousand names, or perhaps more accurately – who causes the name to be forgotten by substituting it with a plethora of names, none of which are remembered either, one name replacing the other ad infinitum so that eventually the child is left nameless.

In addition to Agnon, the child's father is almost self-evidently the 'culprit'. Just as Hirshl's absence was emphasized in the passage that disclosed Meshulam's name, so his presence, standing over the newborn's crib, is highlighted here. The time has finally come for him to name his son, to reify his conceptual reflection on the workings and meaning of proper names.

But Hirshl does not do so. This can, admittedly, be read as yet another abstention, an extreme manifestation of Hirshl's passive, indecisive nature. But overnaming the child can also be read, on the contrary, as a deliberate refusal to fix the child under a single name, that is, as Hirshl's single act of subversion against the bourgeois constraints whose total victory over him is repeatedly asserted in so many of the novel's readings.

Hirshl's original understanding of names appeared unjustifiably limited. First, because it assumes a single, unchanging meaning for names as well as for the people who bear them, but mostly because of the simplistic perception of the accordance between name and bearer. To Hirshl of the beginning of the novel, proper names simply describe (or at least ought to describe) some trait of the bearer; people are supposed to be named after their predominant trait. The refusal of the mature Hirshl to name his second son by a single name can be read on the one hand as a refusal

to peg him down under a single characteristic, to limit his existence to a one-dimensional description, which would then dictate his 'right' name. Such a reading treats Hirshl's understanding of names as essentially unchanged. But the same refusal can also be read as reflecting a realization that names do not belong in the realm of truth values, are not 'right' or 'wrong', 'correct' or 'incorrect', but rather *operate* on their bearers – that names are, in Austin's words, performative and not constative. Names, according to this understanding, carry an interpellative force that can potentially determine or affect the identity of those to whom they are given. Louis Althusser famously discusses the rituals of ideological recognition, "which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects". These rituals are various, but Althusser mentions, by way of demonstration, "the fact of calling you by your name, the fact of knowing, even if I do not know what it is, that you 'have' a name of your own, which means that you are recognized as a unique subject".<sup>64</sup> Even unborn children are always already subjects of ideological recognition:

Everyone knows how much and in what way an unborn child is expected. Which amounts to saying, very prosaically, if we agree to drop the 'sentiments', i.e. the forms of family ideology (paternal/maternal conjugal/fraternal) in which the unborn child is expected: it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father's Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 172-73.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 176. Though Althusser refers by "Father's Name" to family names, there seems to be no justification for such a restriction of the interpellative force of names, and even Althusser later discusses given names, such as 'Moses' or 'Peter', in this context. Thus, the "Father's Name", I suggest, should also be understood as the name given by the father, mother, or anyone else by whom a baby is named.

In Derrida's more dire articulation, "[t]o give a name is always like any birth (certifi cate) [*comme tout acte de naissance*], to sublimate a singularity and to inform against it, to hand it over to the police".<sup>66</sup> This is why, to Derrida, "[o]ne could not live, be there, except by protesting against one's name, by protesting one's non-identity with one's proper name".<sup>67</sup> The abundance of the baby's names, which leaves him with no name at all ("One bears and answers to too many names, and therefore to none", writes Gil Anidjar following Derrida)<sup>68</sup>, can be read as a refusal to 'hand the baby over to the police', Hirshl's latent rebellion against the order to which he has, in every other respect, submitted himself. In this reading, refraining from giving the baby a single name may represent the utopian prospect of exempting him from the determining capacity of the name.

## 7.

Lastly, I would like to suggest another, complementary reading, more radical perhaps, which similarly does not perceive the second child's namelessness as resulting from neglect or accident. Rather, I propose that the child was named after Hirshl's other uncle, the mad dead uncle.

To support such an idea it is first necessary to establish what I will call the novel's extreme naming practice, consisting in the fact that, in *A Simple Story*, even highly marginal characters are given names and not merely described or named by a description. To give just a few examples, in

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<sup>66</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 7b.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida, *The Post Card*, 39.

<sup>68</sup> Gil Anidjar, "Traité de Tous les Noms (What Is Called Naming)", *Epoché* 10, 2 (2006): 288.

Doctor Langsam's clinic Hirshl meets several other patients, all of whom are named, and whose presence sometimes evokes further names of still more marginal characters to whom they are somehow connected: Pinchas Hartleben, Rabi Zanvil (who was not sent to be cured by Rabi Shloymeleh of Sassov), Fybush Vinkler (who constantly curses the author Shlomo Rubin), and Shrentsl, the Doctor's assistant. When Hirshl and Baruch Meir are on the train that brings them back from the clinic, the father's thoughts wonder to Schleien the painter who returned to Shybush from America and is now painting the entire town, and from him to Haim Yehoshua Bleiberg who is jealous as his old paintings were erased by the new ones.<sup>69</sup>

As for Tsirl's brother, it would be hard to overstate the prominence of this 'other' uncle, who is mentioned time and again throughout the novel. He and his madness are brought up for the first time in the third chapter, where his insanity receives a double explanation, first as the result of excessive erudition,<sup>70</sup> and second of a curse that runs through the family. His madness, which has tarnished the family, is presented as at least as one of the reasons for the marriage of Baruch Meir, a servant in a shop, to Tsirl, the young rich daughter whose chances for a suitable match were compromised by the madness of her brother. The first time the uncle appears in Hirshl's thoughts is during the Hanukah party that turns into his engagement party, when Hirshl gloomily watches the other guests celebrating his engagement and thinks to himself: "I can no longer change anything, inevitably I will sit here until everyone leaves. Perhaps my mother's brother wasn't crazy, and what

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<sup>69</sup> This extreme naming practice is not quite as extreme when it comes to certain lower class women and non-Jews. However, Tsirl's brother does not belong to any of these categories.

<sup>70</sup> As Malka Shaked remarks, it is hard to determine whether this explanation is delivered 'objectively' by the narrator or else reflects Tsirl's point of view. Much of the initial description of the uncle sounds both like a direct description by the narrator and like free indirect speech. Malka Shaked, "Ha'im Hirshl haya", 120.

he did – he did in his right mind” (89). Similar thoughts about his uncle recur several times, and as Hirshl gradually sinks into mental illness, the model of his uncle clearly looms large.

It is rather remarkable, then, that Hirshl’s mad uncle remains nameless throughout the novel. The possibility that the narrator simply neglects to name him seems untenable given his seminal role and the text’s extreme naming practice. Perhaps, therefore, the uncle’s namelessness, his unpronounced, uncirculated name, should be regarded as his proper name. No-names as proper names are a common literary phenomenon: ‘Nobody’ in Dickens’s “Nobody’s Story”; Noman, the name that Odysseus calls himself before the Cyclops; the evasive Nobody whom Alice and the King discuss in *Through the Looking Glass*; and even Jules Verne’s Nemo in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* – to ‘name’ but a few examples.<sup>71</sup>

Invoking Althusser again, the mad nameless uncle is perhaps he who escapes ideological recognition as a concrete, distinguishable subject who, by bearing the father’s name, receives an irreplaceable identity.<sup>72</sup> And since there are only two nameless characters in the novel, both of

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<sup>71</sup> Weldon N. Niva, “‘No-Names’ in Literature”, *Names* (1964): 89-97. In the mad uncle’s case, the phenomenon is less explicit than in the case of these other nameless characters. This may well be intentional, though Hebrew does not, in any case, sustain the expressions “nobody” or “no one” as well as the English (hence the great difficulty of translating, for example, the Cyclops scene from *Odyssey*).

<sup>72</sup> In his discussion of the interpellation of religious ideology, Althusser comes very close to the subject of non-naming but does not actually touch upon it. Althusser examines God’s calling one’s name (Peter, Moses) as one’s transformation into a subject, and contends that the answering of the subject to the divine enunciation of the name (“Yes, it really is me”) is the recognition of “a fixed residence” in the world by the religious ideology. Althusser then reads the famous scene from Exodus 3, where God addresses Moses by his name from the burning bush and Moses answers “Here I am”, or, in Althusser’s paraphrase: “It is (really) !! I am Moses thy servant, speak and I shall listen!”. Here, Althusser, (who declares in a footnote that he is “quoting in a combined way, not to the letter but ‘in spirit and truth’”), continues the story: “And the Lord spoke to Moses and said to him, ‘I am that I am’”. According to his reading, this declaration constitutes God’s definition of himself as “the Subject *par excellence*, he who is through himself and for himself”. In fact, Althusser’s shortcut through the biblical story passes over (purposely or not) the intriguing fact that the renowned “I am that I am” (*Eheye asher eheye*) is God’s answer to Moses’s request that God tell him his name. This fascinating moment of naming and interpellation provoked an ongoing debate in Jewish Halakhah about whether God’s response to Moses’s

them prominent, it seems reasonable to surmise that the baby born to Hirshl is named after the uncle Hirshl so admires, thereby receiving his unique and significant non-name.<sup>73</sup>

Several moments in the novel lend support to such a reading. Early on, when Meshulam the uncle is first mentioned in the context of his wedding gift, and immediately following the ‘name interpretations’ of his poem, the narrator remarks that “Hirshl did not remember his uncle Meshulam, neither before his marriage nor after his marriage. If he thought of his family he would think of his mother’s family, like her brother who lost his mind and her father who would wear a jug instead of *tefilin*” (118). The two uncles are overtly juxtaposed, with Hirshl’s emotional affinity to the mother’s brother contrasted with his obliviousness of his father’s sibling (later echoed in his disregard for the child who was named after him). In this sense, the name Meshulam already appears as a site of forgetfulness and even hostility at this very early stage, foreshadowing the later recurrence of these elements in relation to the uncle as well as to the child who bears his name. Later on, with Hirshl’s marriage to Mina described as a source of ongoing agony that leads to his mental deterioration, he cruelly tells her: “I say my uncle was sane and pretended to be a fool, since if he had acted healthy, his father, Shimon Hirsh after whom I am named, would have married him

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question constitutes a refusal to answer him, to give away his name, or whether *Eheyeh* is indeed one of God’s names. Later on in the same dialogue, God discloses his most famous name, YHVH, a name that became an ineffable name, in what Scholem describes as the most significant and the most paradoxical moment in the development of God’s name, a paradox that consists in the fact that “the name, by which God calls himself and which is used to utter invocation, withdraws from the acoustic sphere and becomes unpronounceable”. And since the name becomes ineffable, it must be substituted by other names that may be pronounced, the most common of which is Hashem: the name. The non-name, then, becomes a name. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 179; Gershom Scholem, “The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala”, *Diogenes* 20 (1972), 67. For further discussion of God’s names, see chapter 4.

<sup>73</sup> See Adele Reinhartz’s study of biblical unnamed characters. Reinhartz contends that anonymity does not always veil or efface personal identity but is itself a characterization, and that in certain cases in the bible, the personal identity of a nameless character emerges from the text. Adele Reinhartz, “*Why ask my name? Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).



to a wife he did not love and he would have wasted his life with her” (137). Noting that Hirshl is named after Shimon Hirsh seems gratuitous in this context – unless it is conceived as a mistake (having been named after the wrong family member) that Hirshl wants to underscore – and which he gets a chance to correct upon the birth of his second child.

The more significant case of incorrect naming-after, however, remains that of Hirshl’s son Meshulam, and not Hirshl’s own. Indeed, Baruch Meir’s discomfort and guilt over this matter are closely connected to the crucial comparison between Hirshl’s two uncles, the dead and the living, the sane and the insane. As described earlier, newborns were traditionally named after deceased relatives, especially if those relatives were childless. By this standard, Meshulam the baby should have been named after Tsirl’s dead childless brother. On the other hand, the uncle who lost his mind and probably died young falls under the category of relatives with ‘bad luck’, after whom children are not usually named, because *hashem gorem*.<sup>74</sup>

Tsirl and Baruch Meir, in coming to give their grandson a name while their own son, his father, is hospitalized for what they believe is the legacy of the insane uncle and his ancestors, likely had no intention whatsoever of naming the child after this mad relative. Instead, they name him after the other uncle, Baruch Meir’s brother, who is still alive but distant enough in all respects so that the digression would not be noticed by others. Baruch Meir’s ‘mistake’ on the train, his ambivalent reminiscence of his brother and his discomfort, are directly related to the fact that he and Tsirl took advantage of Meshulam, using him and his name in an unacceptable way.

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<sup>74</sup> This is why Kreindel Tcharney didn’t want to name her son after the ‘deceased’ Menashe Hayim. See Lauterbach, *Studies in Jewish Law*, 59-60.

Finally, while Hirshl and Mina are expecting their second child, at the beginning of the novel's last chapter, Arnold Ziemlich, Mina's relative, arrives in Shybush, and the whole family gathers at the Ziemlich house.

Baruch Meir said to himself, I thought that Gedalia my in-law was the center of the Ziemlich family, suddenly I find out that this Ziemlich, Arnold Ziemlich, is the center of the Ziemlich family, since my in-law has but one daughter and she is named after me while Arnold Ziemlich has many sons and daughters, and a hundred and twenty years from now the Ziemlich name will not remain in Malikrovick where they originate, while in Ashkenaz they will proliferate. (213)

Just before the second son is born, Baruch Meir once again contemplates naming, thinking of names that will remain and those that will not. Once again, just like when he thought about his brother on the train, he enviously compares himself to a relative blessed with many offsprings. As it happens, his reflection also suggest a 'practical' idea regarding whom the expected baby should be named after. Since the first boy was named after a relative from Hirshl's side, it seems only fair, as well as customary, to name the second after one of Mina's relatives.<sup>75</sup> Instead, the boy is named after the person to whom Hirshl feels closest, thus passing on the non-determining, non-fixing name (that is, a non-name) from one generation to the next.

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<sup>75</sup> Munitz, "Shmot bnei adam", 63-66. There are contradicting rulings and customs on this matter, and naming a child first after one of his mother's relatives was also common.

## Chapter 3: How to Destroy Things with Names

### Naming and Interpellation in *Only Yesterday*

#### 1.

Upon its publication in 1945, *Only Yesterday* (*Tmol shilshom*)<sup>1</sup> was celebrated as the pinnacle of Agnon's oeuvre and one of the greatest Hebrew novels, and it continues to be so perceived to this day.<sup>2</sup> The novel features two protagonists: a man and a dog. The former is Yitzhak Kummer, a young man who immigrates to Palestine in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of the second *Aliyah* hoping to work the "Land of Israel", but eventually becomes a house painter, moving back and forth between secular Jaffa and the religious Jewish communities of Jerusalem. The latter is Balak, a stray dog whom Yitzhak Kummer comes upon on the streets of Jerusalem and on whose skin he writes the words "crazy dog", though the dog is nothing of the sort.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, however, the words,

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<sup>1</sup> S.Y. Agnon, *Tmol shilshom*, (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998). In English: S.Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000). All quotations hereafter are from Harshav's translation.

<sup>2</sup> Kurzweil described the novel upon its publication as "the most important and successful experiment in the field of the social novel in our new literature". Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, from a contemporary perspective, characterized it as "arguably the most canonical of modern Hebrew fictions". The most radical appraisal was offered by Boaz Arpali, who describes *Only Yesterday* as "not only the greatest, best, most rich and complete of Agnon's novels but also the best Hebrew novel ever written and one of the greatest novels ever produced in the world literature of the 20th century". Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey S.Y. Agnon [Essays on Agnon's stories]* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1962), 104; Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Sentient Dogs, Liberated Rams, and Talking Asses: Agnon's Biblical Zoo, or Rereading *Tmol shilshom*", *AJS Review* 28 (2004): 105; Boaz Arpali, *Rav-roman: hamishah ma'amarim 'al Tmol shilshom* le-S.Y. Agnon [*Master-Novel: Five essays on Agnon's Only Yesterday*] (Tel Aviv: hakibutz hame'uhad, 1998), 7.

<sup>3</sup> The name Balak, as I later discuss in detail, is a misreading of the inscription "crazy dog". In my discussion I refer to the dog as 'Balak' even before the name is given to him.

which follow him wherever he goes and are repeatedly read and interpreted, take over their referent. Balak becomes a mad, maybe even rabid dog, and finally he meets with Yitzhak again and bites him, bringing about his death.

The thematic, stylistic, structural, and ideological richness and versatility of *Only Yesterday* are remarkable, and critics have often voiced the frustration inherent in any attempt to interpret it.<sup>4</sup> Most of these interpretive difficulties arise abruptly in the midst of the novel, at the moment when Balak enters the plot. The first part of *Only Yesterday* appears to be a brilliant fulfillment of the long-standing expectation by Agnon's contemporaneous critics that he write the grand realistic historical novel of the Zionist project in Palestine, locating Yitzhak Kummer in Jaffa among his "comrades" of the second *Aliyah* and proceeding to bring him face to face with the 'appropriate' ideological and emotional predicaments. But then the second part takes a surprising turn as Yitzhak moves to Jerusalem and begins to submerge himself in the religious Jewish community there, slowly altering his ideological attitudes and personal aspirations. When Yitzhak's story is joined by the plot of the dog, who gradually becomes a conscious, semi-human being, the narrative takes another unexpected turn, the mimetic realism of the first part giving way to a hybrid of genres, parts of which have been described as 'fantastic', 'surrealist', 'grotesque', as 'magical realism', and

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<sup>4</sup> Dan Miron offers a detailed depiction of the hardships encountered by the novel's critics, as well as a scheme of the major interpretative strategies and trends in the critical discourse of *Only Yesterday*. Dan Miron, "Mimashal lesipur toladi, ptihah lediyun beTmol shilshom" [From Parable to Genealogy, An Opening to a Discussion of *Only Yesterday*], *Kovetz Agnon* [Agnon Miscellany], ed. Emunah Yaron et al, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994), 87-159. See also Arpali, *Rav-roman*, 224-38.

more.<sup>5</sup> From that moment on, the novel seems to become be purched on unstable ground, resisting any solid interpretation and defying attempts to ascribe it a unilateral meaning or pin down its genre.

The peculiar plot of the dog, his puzzling textual status and its drastic effect on the novel's texture, the novel's morbid ending with Yitzhak's death from Balak's bite – all these and more constitute *Only Yesterday* as an interpretative riddle, an enigma that requires deciphering. Within this perception of the text as a puzzle, Yitzhak's inscription and the dog to whom it is attached acquire a predominant role. Meshulam Tuchner, one of the novel's earliest interpreters, prophetically described Balak as "one of the marvelous riddles of modern Hebrew literature, which will excite the minds of generations to come".<sup>6</sup>

Some of the novel's interpreters offer unequivocal 'explanations' of the dog as, for example, the libidinal part of Yitzhak's unconsciousness, or on the contrary, the cognitive, critical component of his ego,<sup>7</sup> while others refuse to see Balak as part of Yitzhak's personality and discuss him as an

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<sup>5</sup> The interpretative debates about the novel revolve, among other subjects, around the question of its proper generic classification. Miron identifies three main generic models governing the novel: first, the realistic psychological and tragic novel; second, the apologue; and third, the historical novel. Many critics point to the scene of Yitzhak's meeting with Balak as a moment of textual and textural rupture that results in a drastic change of genres. Arpali, whose entire book is dedicated to the interpretation of *Only Yesterday*, describes it first as a "social", "panoramic", "picaresque", "dramatic" and "psychological" novel. After Balak enters the story, a moment which Arpali calls a "thematic, psychological, symbolical, allegorical and grotesque intersection", the previous genres on which the novel was based, all "more or less within the boundaries of realism", are said to give way to "the fantastic or surrealist, which is also grotesque and symbolic". Miron, "Mimashal lesipur", 122-48; Arpali, *Rav-roman*, 224-25.

<sup>6</sup> Meshulam Tuchner, *Pesher Agnon* [The Meaning of Agnon] (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1968), 77. Ezrahi contends that "Deciphering Agnon is a lifelong and intergenerational pursuit", but she proposes endorsing the position that "the secret is not a riddle to be solved but an enigma to be honored". Ezrahi, "Sentient Dogs", 106-07.

<sup>7</sup> To Kurzweil, "the dog is a symbol of lust, sin, primeval forces, impulses running wild, of madness and insanity". Tuchner, on the other hand, finds in Balak what Yitzhak lacks: reflectivity and dialectics. Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey*, 110; Tuchner, *Pesher Agnon*, 76.

independent protagonist. And whereas many readers attribute to Balak a wide range of allegorical meanings, others advocate abandoning figurative readings of the dog in favor of discussing him “from within his own personality”.<sup>8</sup> In contemporary interpretations, the character of Balak often instigates meta-critical questions about the very possibility and imperative of solving the riddle and about the status of interpretation as it is reflected in the novel.<sup>9</sup> These meta-critical discussions are encouraged by the fact that Agnon does not wait for the readers of the novel to come and unravel the mystery of Balak; rather, the reading of the dog begins within the novel itself, as he is interpreted by journalists from Jerusalem and then from all over the world, by authors, painters and scholars who ascribe to him a multitude of allegorical and symbolical meanings.

In this chapter I try not so much to solve the riddle of Balak as to describe it in terms of naming and interpellation. I read Yitzhak’s inscription as a performative utterance that is interpreted out of context. Reading the famous riddle of Balak through the theoretical framework of names raises intriguing questions, which I consider below, about the nature of the act of naming: does it take place in the unique moment of writing, in the singular creative act that cannot be erased? Or is the name created in and through perpetual, excessive readings that are inherently erroneous? Yitzhak may have called Balak “crazy dog” but his readers, his interpreters, are active participants in the process of creating Balak’s transformative name.

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<sup>8</sup> Eli Shavid, “Kelev hutzot ve’adam” [“A Stray Dog and a Man”], in *S.Y. Agnon babikoret*, ed. Barshai, 285.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Golomb-Hoffman’s reading concentrates on Balak as a text running wild, which suggests the instability of any text, the breakdown of authoritarian writing. Miron describes the way in which interpretation becomes a principal thematic and conceptual component of the novel. Ben-Dov, in an essay titled “Mad dog and the Madness of Criticism”, discusses Agnon’s dual attitude toward his interpreters as it is reflected in the novel, underscoring his mockery of them. Anne Golomb-Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S.Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 131; Miron, “Mimashal lesipur”, 95-96; Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo me’usharot*, 377-86.

Signs, and in particular names, as they appear in the novel, do not just describe objects or refer to them. They are charged with a certain force, an inaugural, interpellative one. But what is the nature of this force, and what is its source? Unlike Hirshl's understanding of names at the beginning of *A Simple Story*, here there cannot be a right or wrong name since the name, however 'wrong' it may appear, determines its bearer and produces it. If the last page of *A Simple Story* gestured at a possibility of not naming a newborn as a means to avoid interpellation, in *Only Yesterday* we indeed witness the awful potential of a name to act in the world.

Borrowing from the title of Austin's book, which is central to my reading of *Only Yesterday*, a fundamental question may be said to emanate from this novel, namely: How to do things with names? Or more aptly, how to create things with names; and maybe even, how to destroy things with names.

## 2.

Yitzhak's act of naming Balak which occurs halfway through the novel is by no means an isolated event. Indeed, it is the climax of a gradual progression that unfolds throughout the first part of the text, a semiotic evolution of sorts in which Yitzhak becomes a sign maker and a name painter as his paintbrush is charged with ever-growing semiotic powers.

An early precursor of *Only Yesterday* titled "The Beginning of Yitzhak", a story published by Agnon some 11 years before *Only Yesterday* and later incorporated into the novel, opens with the

statement that “Yitzhak Kummer was not a painter from his beginning”,<sup>10</sup> indicating the significance of both his actual profession and his fantasized one. Yitzhak’s initial dream, to become one of the “laborers of the Land of Israel” who “turned the deserts of the Land of Israel into homes and vineyards and field” (44), is of such importance to him that he never renounces this unrealistic perception of himself.

As a result of his failure to fulfill this dream, Yitzhak becomes a painter. His profession is consistently presented as a pragmatic compromise, even a betrayal of the noble mission. As Miron points out, painting is represented throughout the novel as the polar opposite of working the land, and it is not by chance that Yitzhak is initiated into the profession by a “convert”.<sup>11</sup> Painting is portrayed as a symbol of a psychological, moral, and metaphysical flaw, namely, a correcting of the surface that ignores what lies inside.<sup>12</sup> While the novel's negative stance toward painting is, in the first place, a manifestation of Yitzhak’s own sense of failure – “I ascended to the Land of Israel to work it and preserve it, and in the end, what am I, a painter, a smearer” (178) – it exceeds his own subjective perception. A similar opinion is expressed, for example, by Hemdat – a character whose point of view is generally highly evaluated, and nowhere ridiculed, by the narrator. “Hemdat was friendly to Yitzhak, even though he wasn’t comfortable with the craft Yitzhak practiced, for there is something misleading in it, since painters are wont to embellish ugly things” (397). The entire critical discourse of the novel, Miron indicates, has embraced this judgmental perception of

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<sup>10</sup> S.Y. Agnon, “Tehilato shel Yitzhak”, *Sefer hashanah shel Eretz Israel* (1935): 21.

<sup>11</sup> The term refers to Jews who have converted to another religion, typically Christianity, and within Agnon’s conceptual world, marks an apparent moral and even metaphysical flaw.

<sup>12</sup> Miron, “Mimashal lesipur”, 100-01.



painting as a misleading covering-up of the surface.<sup>13</sup> Adi Tzemah, for example, notes that paint does not relate to the interior of things.<sup>14</sup>

Transplanting this position into a semiotic arena one might say that it considers paint to be a sign, albeit a false one. The status of paint as a sign is not obvious, owing probably to its salient material aspect. In Barthes's terms, paint belongs in the category of the semiological sign, or sign-function, whose origin is utilitarian or functional and which differs from the linguistic sign at the level of their 'substancehood', whose essence is not to signify. Semiological signs are often objects of everyday use, such as clothes or food, which are used to signify only in a derivative way.<sup>15</sup> Paint stands for 'beauty', 'newness', et cetera, and is often taken to signify a pertinent quality of that which is painted ('something beautiful' 'something new', even 'being of good quality'). However, it does not always do so 'properly', since it can be attached, and often is, to an object that 'in fact' is old or ugly.

Yet the novel itself, or in any case its narrator, does not necessarily share the negative perception of painting as a misleading sign. The narrator of *Only Yesterday*, like that of many other Agnon texts, is also ironic and sarcastic, and these qualities increase in the second half of the novel as he depicts the whereabouts of Balak. Often the reader must struggle to understand when the narrator is reporting 'objective' perceptions and facts and when he is imitating a ridiculous or

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Adi Tzemah, *Kri'ah tamah besifrut Ivrit bat hame'a ha'esrim* [Fine Letters: Hebrew Literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1991), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 41.

grotesque line of thought of a character or a group of characters. Moreover, while he is sometimes an omniscient figure, at other times he speaks in the first person plural, in the name of a certain group of characters – mostly “our brethren of the Second *Aliyah*” (3) – or else uses free indirect speech to reflect the cognition of a given character, typically Yitzhak.<sup>16</sup> In the latter cases his knowledge is presented as limited and he sometimes explicitly reports the state of not knowing a fact or being unable to determine between two possible emotional motivations of a character.

It is no simple matter, then, to figure out the disposition of this elusive narrator regarding paint and the fact of Yitzhak’s becoming a painter. To some extent, certainly, he adopts the Zionist ethos that sanctifies working the land, reserving an ironic tone for those who have withdrawn from this original pioneer mission. Yet some of the narrator’s explicit comments concerning paint seem unreservedly positive. “Two things attract a person’s heart, a new house and a house that was painted. A house, because it separates him from the world; and paint because it’s a higher model of the color of the firmament, which appeal to the human soul” (138).<sup>17</sup> Unlike the house, whose aim is to protect and enclose, paint, rather than covering up and concealing, broadens the human soul and opens it up to higher spheres. This spiritual or metaphysical nature of paint is more pragmatically expressed shortly after this passage, in reference to the change Yitzhak has undergone from a “fellow with nine measures of grief poured over his face” to one whose “hand is as light as his soul and his soul is as light as his hand” (Ibid):

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<sup>16</sup> See Arpali’s comprehensive portrayal of the narrator, especially his notion that “the difficulty to identify the different voices and determine the level of the authority given to them by the narrator is an intentional aspect in the poetics of the novel”. Arpali, *Rav-roman*, 270-318.

<sup>17</sup> According to the Hebrew text, the human soul is actually *made up* of the colors of the skies, which is more drastic still than saying they ‘appeal to it’. *Tmol Shilsom*, 136.

But don't be amazed, for human beings are wont to change, like those walls he is paintings. And that's a mistake most of the world makes, when they see a sad person when he's happy, they say maybe he's not himself. And in truth there are many qualities in a person from the beginning of his creation, and everything happens for many reasons. (138-39)

Paint is likened to human beings through the association of both with the prospect of genuine change. The more obvious side of the analogy is that human beings are indeed not necessarily condemned to a static one-dimensional existence; but when applied to paint, the analogy can seem more puzzling, suggesting as it does that objects are similarly mutable merely by virtue of being painted. The case of a painted wall does not lend itself as readily as the human case to an explanation that takes the 'external' change to be a result or a symptom of an 'inner' one. The alternative is to regard paint as possessing some degree of autonomy and even priority over the objects it covers. Given this understanding, paint is no longer a false positive sign but rather a highly powerful vehicle for engendering real transformation.

A similar perspective is expressed by Yitzhak himself upon meeting an Arab night guard with whom he engages in a discussion on the subject of 'painting dogs':

Said the guard, What do you say my brother, this dog is handsome. A dog that was stolen from me was handsome. His skin was as brown as the eyes of a doe. Said Yitzhak, Brown skin you want? Tomorrow, you'll have a brown skin. Said the guard, You've got one like that? Said Yitzhak, You want a red one, tomorrow you'll find a reddish one. Said the guard, A kennel of dogs you have, my brother? Said Yitzhak, Not even the tail of a dog do I have. Said the guard, You conjure them up by magic? Said Yitzhak, various colors do I have, and if you want, I'll paint your dog brown or red or yellow or green. Said the guard, Never have I seen a green dog. Said Yitzhak, Yet I can make you a green dog. The guard laughed and they laughed together. (141)

Here we witness the beginnings of a 'professional hubris' developing in Yitzhak, one that will later reach extreme proportions and indeed cost him his life. But philosophically speaking, his position is intriguing and not untenable. To him there is no difference between a 'green dog' and 'a dog

painted green', as the Arab guard believes there is. The guard's gullibility, his literal-mindedness in the face of Yitzhak's facetiousness is simply the assertion of an essentialist stand, according to which a brown dog painted green is still essentially a brown dog. Yitzhak, on the other hand, raises the phenomenological option of renouncing or at least bracketing the presupposition that the dog is brown independently of the viewer's visual experience, which conceives it as green.

From Yitzhak's perspective, 'painting a dog green' is the equivalent of 'making a dog green', foreseeing the fact that his brush possesses inaugural powers, that to paint something X is to make it X. It is no coincidence that painting is associated here with conjuring magic, for it is indeed invested with the same powers: to create a reality that was not there before, to change objects in a profound and 'unreasonable' manner.

Yitzhak's professional progress occurs through a gradual process of training under the guidance of a succession of instructors: first 'the convert', then 'Sweet Foot', both painters, and finally Bloykof the artist. In the early stages he is described as "a novice at work, for his brush leads him and he doesn't lead his brush" (70). But the accumulated experience and his encounter with Sweet Foot gradually pay off as "his soul [is] relieved and his hand [grows] light" (77), until eventually the narrator proclaims that "We shall not offend the honor of craftsmen if we count Yitzhak among them" (138).

From a day laborer who "smears" paint to eke out a living Yitzhak grows into a professional house painter and then into a painter of signboards and memorial stones. Eventually, when he encounters Balak, Yitzhak is presented as an almost-artist or a self-proclaimed artist. As he becomes

more proficient Yitzhak's work gains in significance, his brush producing signs that are increasingly overt semiotic constructs. At first, the materiality of the paint is a primary means in itself; it serves simply to cover up objects, and as a signifier its signified is somewhat subliminal, or at least covert. Later, when he creates signboards and finally memorial stones, the paint as signifier becomes secondary to the signified, to the meaning it conveys.

Yitzhak's conversion into a sign painter results from two transitional events: moving to Jerusalem and meeting Bloykof, the artist who teaches him the craft. Jerusalem and Jaffa are portrayed throughout the novel as polar opposites in various respects, one of which may be defined as semiotic. Here is how Sonya, Yitzhak's lover whom he meets in Jaffa, describes Jerusalem to him:

And everyplace in Jerusalem is called Moshe, either Ohel Moshe or Zikhron Moshe or Yemin Moshe or Mizkeret Moshe. If you want to get to one of those places, you forget which word is attached to Moshe, and you go from Moshe to Moshe and don't get to the Moshe you wanted. While Jaffa is full of gardens and vineyards and citrus groves, and there's the sea and cafes, and young people [...]. (159)

Jerusalem, to Sonya, is a site of naming, or rather of misnaming and confusion. It is a place where similar names are used to indicate different places, complicating the practical task of getting to these places. Names, in Sonya's view, based on her tendentious selection, are related to the past and to memory, and indeed two of the names she lists explicitly mean 'the memory of Moshe'; they are names that commemorate another name. The name Moshe (Moses) – as a proper name of an individual – is reiterated in these place names, and to this extent memory (which is, among other things, the signification of absence) is indeed at work. But as names that are supposed to signify places, to refer to a presence, these signs fail. Name as memory prevails over name as reference, and the proliferated memory of 'Moshe' annihilates the ability of 'Mizkeret Moshe' ('The memento of Moshe') to function as a useful index. This feature of Jerusalem is opposed by Sonya not to

adequate naming in Jaffa but to pure concreteness, as Jaffa to her is a place of referents and not signifiers: gardens and vineyards and people.

It's no wonder, then, that in Jerusalem Yitzhak finds himself learning the craft of sign painting. The signboards<sup>18</sup> he produces are indexes par excellence, that is, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, indexes "which represent their objects [...] only by virtue of a real connection with them",<sup>19</sup> and whose most salient function is to point to their object, declaring that it is 'there'. However, they have a descriptive or predicative aspect as well: a signboard for a barber's shop not only points to the presence of a barber's shop but also says that "this *is* a barber's shop (and not something else)".<sup>20</sup>

In signboard painting Yitzhak finally finds his true vocation: he earns a living, his work becomes widely known for its quality and is scattered all over Jerusalem. Yitzhak becomes an active participant in the Jerusalemite propensity for naming, and perhaps over-naming or over-signifying, as Sonya sees it: "You don't have one single neighborhood of the neighborhoods of Jerusalem where you don't find the colors of our comrade Yitzhak. In Even Israel and Beit Israel and Kneset

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<sup>18</sup> To distinguish the physical signs that Yitzhak's craft produces from the term 'sign' in its more general meaning I use 'signboard' to refer to the former. Hebrew avoids this confusion, indicating the former with the word '*shelet*' and the latter with '*siman*'.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 2 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992-98), 460. Although signboard use symbols (words) as indexes often do. To Peirce, most signs are not pure forms of their kind, especially indexes.

<sup>20</sup> There is an historical relation between names and signboards. As Stahl shows, in Europe of the Middle Ages it was customary to hang a sign in the entrance to shops marking the kind of merchandise the shop sells or the services it offers. For example, a butcher might hang a painting of an ox and a midwife a painting of a baby. This custom persisted up until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Germany, such painted signboard were hung also above houses with the pictogram relating either to the owner's occupation or to his given name (for example, a shopkeeper might paint scales, and a bar owner – vines). In some cases, over time, the signboard became the person's epithet, and later – a surname, such as Veinshtock [Vineshtock]. The name Rothschild, which translates into 'red sign', originates from the red signboard that hung above the entrance to the family's home. Stahl, *Motza hashemot*, 221-22.

Israel and Mahane Israel [...] and in Ohel Moshe and Sha'arei Moshe [...]” (284), and the list continues of places with overlapping names in all of which Yitzhak has left his mark.

As he tutors Yitzhak in the craft of painting signs, Bloykof the artist expresses his opinion on the relation between indexes and referents, offering Yitzhak the following piece of advice: “Pick up your brush and don’t spare your efforts, for you are not the main thing, but what you do, and what you do isn’t the main thing, but the act itself. And don’t say, is it worth it for me to put all my strength into that shopkeeper’s sign. **His merchandise will rot, but the sign you make must be beautiful**” (250). Bloykof’s reference to the rotting merchandise is almost prophetic of what later awaits Balak, whose “limbs grew rusty and his whole body stank. And even his hair got sick, aside from those two words the artisan had written on him, which stood firm and shining in their blaze of colors, for Yitzhak was a master painter and his colors don’t get erased” (297).

Bloykof, presented in the novel as the epitome of a true artist,<sup>21</sup> determines at once that Yitzhak is not an artist: “There’s a special quality you’ve got and I don’t know what it is. Too bad you weren’t born an artist. Because a person doesn’t become an artist unless he is born an artist, but he can learn an art that is an art,<sup>22</sup> so he started teaching him sign-painting” (249). Several critics stress the fact that Yitzhak does not belong in the category of ‘true artists’. Michal Arbel opens her discussion of *Only Yesterday* with the contention that Yitzhak “is not an artist and not a creative

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<sup>21</sup> Michal Arbel, for example, calls him “the most distinct artist in the novel”, Ezrahi “the greatest artist in this narrative”(123). Most critics perceive him similarly, though Zemah reads Sweet Foot as “the perfect artist”. Michal Arbel, *Katuv al oro shel hakelev: Al t'fisat hayetzira etzel S.Y. Agnon* [Written on the Dog's Skin; S.Y. Agnon: Concepts of Creativity and Art] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2006), 200; Ezrahi, “Sentient dogs”, 123; Zemah, *Kri'ah tamah*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> The Hebrew actually reads: “you can learn a craft that is an art” (*Tmol shilshom*, 184). The Hebrew words for craft (*umanut*) and art (*omanut*) are very similar, differing only in a single vowel and one that does not even always appear in the writing.

person”,<sup>23</sup> and Ezrahi writes that Yitzhak is not one of “Agnon’s great artists”, like, for example, Ben Uri from “Agunot” of Raphael from “The Tale of the scribe” (“*Agadat hasofer*”).<sup>24</sup> Yet Bloykof notices that Yitzhak is afflicted with strong artistic aspirations and urges, which manifest themselves even while he is still in Jaffa: “His hand is as light as his soul and his soul is as light as his hand. From the lightness of his soul, he jests and draws funny pictures, sometimes to astonish people and sometimes to please the children and sometimes for himself and his own enjoyment” (138). This somewhat unconscious artistic impulse will eventually drive Yitzhak, at the moment he encounters Balak, to reach beyond his limits toward the spheres of artistic creation. The craft he learns from Bloykof is thus meant to enable the sublimation of his artistic tendencies in order, as it were, to make the most of them. But from Yitzhak’s point of view, his new craft represents a compromise, being neither the work of the land nor the work of art, and therefore never fully satisfying him. Yitzhak, who is, in Anne Golomb-Hoffman’s words, “opaque to himself”,<sup>25</sup> sees himself as an unrealized artist, just as, early in the novel, he perceives himself as a wasted laborer of the land.

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<sup>23</sup> Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 198.

<sup>24</sup> Ezrahi, “Sentient Dogs”, 121-22. Both Ben Uri and Raphael are artists who practice the scribal arts (transcribing Torah books).

<sup>25</sup> Most critics have adopted the characterization of Yitzhak as a simple man, a mediocre and extremely unaware protagonist. Avraham Band, for instance, describes him a tepid, simple, and shallow person who stumbles into a historical situation beyond his understanding and control. Miron notes that while Agnon has created many ‘lowly’ protagonists, lacking physical beauty, valor, and great aspirations, none is as opaque as Yitzhak Kummer, who lacks any self-consciousness and neither knows nor understands why he acts as he does. However, Miron concurs with Haviva Yonai, who notes Yitzhak’s “gentleness of soul, genuineness, innocence and seriousness” and suggests taking note of the positive attitude expressed toward him by such critical and perceptive characters as Sweet Foot, Bloykof, and others. Anne Golomb-Hoffman, “Topographies of Reading: Agnon through Benjamin”, *Prooftext* 21 (2001): 76; Avraham Band, “Hahete ve’onsho beTmol shilshom” [Crime and Punishment in *Only Yesterday*] in *Agnon babikoret*, ed. Barshai, 302. Miron, “Mimashal lesipur”, 125-28; Haviva Yonai, “Darchey itzuv hagibor beTmol Shilshom” [Methods of Designing the Protagonist in *Only Yesterday*], *Hahinukh* 39, 3-4 (1966): 132.



The question of who does and does not constitute a true artist, which recurs in the novel, is a theme unto itself and one that I address more thoroughly elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> For the purposes of the present discussion it's worth noting that one of the criteria the novel proposes for drawing this distinction is the nature of the representation, pitting the simple, literal representation of objects and events that characterized the novel's would-be-artists against the creativity, transformation, and transcendence that mark authentic artistic creation. Arbel notes that many of Agnon's texts dealing with art and creation echo such romantic conceptions regarding the transcendental nature of artistic creation: the gap between the work of art, which aspires to perfection and unity, and the reality from and for which it is created; the proximity between the human and the divine act of creation; the mystical union of the artist and his creation; the transformation that true artists undergo in the process of creating their grand artwork; and the abstract eternity manifested in the work of art.<sup>27</sup> Bloykof, who seems to reflect each of these notions, "no longer paints the pictures that made him popular in his generation, and he doesn't make frames for pictures, but paints what Heaven shows him" (217). The objects of his paintings are abstract concepts such as "the splendor of Jerusalem", "life" and "death", representing not the objects of nature but nature as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Shira Hadad, *Mi She'ose siman: kria semiotit beTmol shilshom [The Sign Maker: A Semiotic Reading of Only Yesterday]* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2011), 27-33.

<sup>27</sup> Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 10; 22.

<sup>28</sup> At the other end of the artistic spectrum lies the character Gorishkin, a writer who constantly struggles with the question of art and reality but whose answers are severely ridiculed. Gorishkin "hasn't yet made up his mind whether to write things as they are, that is, to copy from reality, or to make his books novels. On the one hand, his heart inclines to things as they are, for there is no truth like the truth of actions, and on the other hand, novels are likely to appeal to the heart and lead to action" (108-09). Gorishkin's conflict is based on the assumption that certain events need to be represented and what remains to be determined is whether to represent them "as they are" or through an artistic medium. The only advantage Gorishkin grants art over 'simple representation' is a teleological one, concerning the effect of literature on its 'consumers'. Thus, artistic creation is no more than a speed contest: "That tale I read here also

Ezrahi shows that Yitzhak's approach to "the inner sanctum of true artistic activity" is always mediated by 'true' painters, especially Bloykof, and that this mediation is necessary to save him from "unmediated proximity to the sacred".<sup>29</sup> Such proximity is so dangerous, she claims, that even Bloykof paints Jerusalem "behind a veil".

As Miron points out, the problem of the relation between art and reality is an imperative component of the more general issue of the pertinence of signs and their referents. Agnon's decision to fill his novel with dozens of artistic and literary figures as well as a plentitude of meta-poetic remarks on issues of art and creation was meant not only to reinforce the historical background of the plot but also to establish the parodic – and at the same time entirely vital and grave – backdrop to Yitzhak's fatal deed.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.

Yitzhak's meeting with the dog is foreshadowed once by the narrator, in the chapter that immediately precedes the account of their encounter. The chapter, titled "Memorial Stones", tells of Yitzhak's occupation as a painter of engraved tablets that are attached to the walls of "houses and courtyards" built by philanthropists, who dedicate them to "the holiness of the Lord and His Land".

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happened to me, [...] and that writer came along and wrote and made a book [...]. It seems to me that the essence of a writer is his speed. If he's fast and writes, he wins, and if not, others come along and take what's his" (113).

<sup>29</sup> Ezrahi, "Sentient Dogs", 123.

<sup>30</sup> Miron, "Mimashal lesipur", 97-98.

And everyone who dedicates a house in Jerusalem puts up a memorial stone, to give him good place and a name in its walls, and writes his name, and his extravagant generosity is an eternal memory unto the last generation. He who is righteous, his charity stands and his name is forgotten. He who is not righteous, his name remains and his charity is enjoyed by those who are unworthy. Our comrade Yitzhak, who made his name for his paints that can endure rain and wind and snow, was called on to paint in color the writing on the tablets. How long do his colors last? Once upon a time, Yitzhak wrote on the skin of a dog and the dog wandered around a few months, wallowed in all kinds of dung, and the writing wasn't wiped off. And what did he see fit to write on the skin of a dog? That will come in due time. (283)

The narrator's typical sarcasm, here manifested in the suspicious attitude toward the generosity of these philanthropists, leads him to articulate a conflict, which is not logically necessary, between the memory of the name and the appropriate function of charity, as if the two were mutually exclusive; a conflict reminiscent of Sonya's mocking depiction of Jerusalem and her ensuing juxtaposition of the commemoration of names with concrete existence.

In light of this conflict, names are best forgotten, erased, but Yitzhak's paints, used for painting these names, endure. Disguised as praise for Yitzhak's proficiency, the description of the durability of his paint acquires a bleak undertone when read in the context of the preceding statement about the names that ought to be forgotten and the subsequent mention of the writing on the dog. But there is one important difference between these two forms of writing performed by Yitzhak. In the memorial stones, Yitzhak paints "in color the writing on the tablets", or, in a more literal translation, "fills with paint the script on the tablets".<sup>31</sup> In other words, the name is already engraved in stone, given and written by someone else. Thus while Yitzhak may be a participant in the invalidated ritual of memory, he is merely working within contours drawn by others. By

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<sup>31</sup> *Tmol shilshom*, 208.

contrast, one of the most salient aspects of his transgression in the meeting with the dog lies in the fact that there he makes a name of his own – gives or writes a name that was not previously given or written.

Just as he finishes painting the name of a philanthropist on a marble tablet affixed to a house that was donated for the poor in the Bukharan quarter of Jerusalem, Yitzhak meets “a stray dog, with short ears, a sharp nose, a stub of a tail, and hair that looked maybe white or maybe brown or maybe yellow” (286).

Yitzhak picked up one of his brushes and didn't know if he wanted to threaten the dog with it or if he wanted to wipe it off on the dog's skin. The dog stuck out his tongue and gazed at him. You can't say he wanted to lick the brush, for paints are salty and a dog doesn't like salt, but he didn't want the owner of the brush to put his brush away with no result. Yitzhak's arm stretched out and his hand started trembling. He reached out his brush to the dog, and the dog reached himself out to Yitzhak. Yitzhak stroked the dog's skin, like a clerk stroking the paper before writing. Once again he dipped his brush and leaned toward the dog and wrote a few letters on his back. We don't know if, from the start, he meant to write what he wrote, or if in the end it seemed to him that he wrote with malice aforethought.<sup>32</sup> But why should we get into that doubt, we had better look at his acts. And so, by the time Yitzhak stood up, he had written in calligraphy on the dog the letters d-o-g. He patted his back and told him, From now on, folks won't mistake you, but will know that you're a dog. And you won't forget you're a dog either. (Ibid)

The passage that begins with doubt and uncertainty ends with solid facts, with knowledge and assertion. Yitzhak's contented remark at the end of this first part of his meeting with the dog has an air of finality and leaves no room for doubt: from now on, “folks” as well as the dog himself will know that this is a dog. But Balak does not walk away. Instead he stays by Yitzhak's side, “still waiting for his moisture to drip on him”.

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<sup>32</sup> The Hebrew term for “malice aforethought”, *kavanah tehilah*, which is similarly used in legal contexts, actually includes no explicit reference to malice. It can be rendered literally as ‘preformed intent’.

Yitzhak saw the dog standing and looking at him. He said to him, What else do you want? Isn't it enough for you, dog, that I wasted a whole brushful of paint on you? But the dog wagged his tail and barked entreatingly. Yitzhak smiled and said to him, Are you crazy? You want me to make spots on your skin or do you want me to paint your name in gold? The dog lifted his wet nose and barked a weak, obsequious bark. Yitzhak's hand began to tingle, like an artist whose hand approaches his work. He rubbed it on his clothes to get rid of the tingling, but it kept on tingling. So he dipped the brush and stretched out his hand. The dog stretched himself toward him and looked at his brush as if with curiosity. In truth, there was no curiosity here, but there was a flirtation, he raised himself a bit and raised himself a bit again until between him and the brush there was just a margin of nothing. The brush started dripping. The brush didn't dry out until the words Crazy Dog were written on the dog's skin. (286-87)

This dense, dramatic scene, depicted in a quasi-cinematic close-up and slow motion, a scene that engenders the novel's entire second half, is split in two by a fine line. In the scene's first segment, Yitzhak, who is compared to "a clerk", writes the word dog on the skin of a dog. In the second, Yitzhak, now compared to "an artist", adds the word 'crazy' to his inscription, for no apparent reason. In this moment his inscription turns, I contend, from a constative utterance to a performative utterance. Yitzhak moves from stating facts or describing them to doing something altogether different with his words, and here lies the seed of the entire tragic and grotesque chain of events that will eventually ruin both the writer and the referent of his words.

Several critics indicate that the scene echoes Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2. According to Todd Hasak-Lowy, "We should take note when Agnon highlights Yitzhak's act of naming the dog. The narrative [...] explicitly echoes, however tongue-in-cheek, the biblical scene of the first man naming animals".<sup>33</sup> Arbel associates the scene with the earlier description of Arzef,

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<sup>33</sup> Todd Hasak-Lowy, "A Mad Dog's Attack on Secularized Hebrew: Rethinking Agnon's *Temol shilshom*", *Prooftext* 24 (2004): 184.

one of Yitzhak's acquaintances from Jerusalem, a reclusive taxidermist who "lives alone like the First Adam in the Garden of Eden, with no wife and no sons and no cares and no troubles, among all kinds of livestock and animals and birds and insects and reptiles and snakes and scorpions" (242). Arzef is a modest man who seeks neither money nor honor; "It's enough for Arzef to look at his handiwork and know that [...] he gave a name and remainder to some birds of the Land of Israel who were said to have vanished from the earth" (242). Arbel points out that the likening of Arzef to the First Adam relates to Adam's naming of these animals for the first time, and she adds that Yitzhak, too, in the first phase of his writing on the dog's skin, repeats Adam's act by calling a dog 'dog'.<sup>34</sup>

Yitzhak himself, at one point, refers to his own act in terms of naming. After writing the word 'dog' and before adding 'crazy', as he apparently tries to decipher what the dog is asking of him, he addresses his mute interlocutor directly and suggests: "Are you crazy? You want me to make spots on your skin or **do you want me to paint your name in gold?**" The verb 'to paint' is used here in the sense of painting *over*,<sup>35</sup> Yitzhak proposing in effect to apply gold color to the already written letters of the word 'dog', as he has just done to the name of the philanthropist.<sup>36</sup> At this

<sup>34</sup> Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 245.

<sup>35</sup> In Hebrew Yitzhak actually says, "I will mark (*atayeg*) your name in gold", alluding to a particular procedure of 'fine writing' in which a different color is applied to the contour or the upper part of a letter. *Tmol shilshom*, 211.

<sup>36</sup> The freshly finished tablet is described in detail: "The name of the donor he painted in gold and the words of the ban in red and the poor in black and each of the other words had its own color, until the tablet rejoiced in its hues" (285). Thus, gold is 'the color of names'. Uri S. Cohen notes that Yitzhak is clearly alluding to Jeremiah 13:23: "Can the Ethiopian (Black) change his skin, or the leopard his spots?". Uri S. Cohen, "*Only Yesterday: A Hebrew Dog and Colonial Dynamics in Pre-Mandate Palestine*", in *A Jew's Best Friend? The Image of the Dog throughout Jewish History*, eds. Rakefet Zalashik and Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman (Sussex Academic Press, 2011), 11 [forthcoming, reference to page no. in original article].

stage, then, Yitzhak is once again doing that which he is known for – painting, so to speak, within the contours of an already given or engraved name.

“The languages of things are imperfect, and they are dumb”, maintains Benjamin, who reads the biblical scene of creation and naming in Genesis 1 and 2 in order to discover “what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language”.<sup>37</sup> Man, to Benjamin, is “the namer”: “He is the lord of nature and can give names to things”. In naming he goes beyond himself, attaining knowledge of things – “God’s creation is completed when things receive their names from man”.<sup>38</sup>

Benjamin conceives of Adam’s naming as a double act of translation. Things are incomplete unless they are named by humans, and human naming acts as the medium of translation between God’s infinite creative word and unspoken, nameless things.<sup>39</sup> When Adam calls the animals by their name he translates the silent language of things into that of man. This translation is not only “of the mute into the sonic; it is also the translation of the nameless into name. It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one”.<sup>40</sup>

But Yitzhak is not Adam and he is not in paradise. His acts take place in the world where all animals, the dog included, have already been named, the world that, moreover, followed the fall

<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and”, 67.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>39</sup> Batrice Hanssen, “Language and mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s work”, in *Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. Davis S. Ferris (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 59.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, “On Language as Such”, 70.

from Eden. To Benjamin, the fall from paradise marked the end of the pure language of names, a purity that was “violated” and “injured”, giving way to a different language that consists of judgment and abstraction as well as a plurality of languages that causes confusion. If the language of man after the fall is not a pure language of names, what then is the nature of the naming that nonetheless takes place in this “injured” language? Benjamin discusses the “melancholy” of being named “not from the one blessed paradisiacal language of names but from the hundreds of languages of man, in which name has already withered, yet which, according to God’s pronouncement, have knowledge of things”, and he adds: “Things have no proper names except in God. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed”.<sup>41</sup>

Yitzhak indeed overnames the dog. Perhaps he is encouraged by his success in giving him a correct name, or perhaps, on the contrary, frustrated by the absence of any originality or creativity in the act of calling a dog ‘dog’ after it has already been so named by Adam. After the fall, ‘dog’ is no longer a proper name per se but a noun, a category to which something can belong or fail to belong, and calling a dog ‘dog’ is no longer a matter of naming.<sup>42</sup> In this respect, any calling of the dog ‘dog’ that comes after Adam’s calling has already evolved from a nominative act into an act of describing, asserting, and judging. Yitzhak’s amused comment after writing the first word (“From now on, folks won’t mistake you, but will know that you’re a dog”) confirms the status of his text as ‘merely’ a constative utterance, still just a signboard. In stating this, Yitzhak explicitly articulates the immediate, automatic link that readers of his text will make between the word and the dog, that is

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 71-73.

<sup>42</sup> To be precise: it is no longer a matter of giving a name, but can certainly be a matter of calling someone by a name.



to say, he gives voice to the fact that they will read the word as if it were a signboard, not only written on the dog's skin but also referring or pointing to him.

Neither Yitzhak nor the dog, who “liked his contact with a human creature who has a kind of dripping vessel”, are completely satisfied after the first word is completed, and so the writing continues. The scene's second part is portrayed like a transcendental moment of creation – the tingling hand, driven by a transcendental force, slowly approaching the skin; the omission of the moment of their actual reunion, as if it were ineffable – with the effect of further underscoring the earthly nature of Yitzhak's act, the extent to which he's deaf to what the dog is trying to communicate to him in his ‘mute language’. While pretending to comply with the desire that draws the dog to the paint and to the painter – a desire no less powerful than the inner force attracting Yitzhak to the dog – Yitzhak is in fact abusing his power over the speechless creature. Balak's subservience in these circumstances stems from his need of something that Yitzhak can offer him, namely the physical sensation of the wet substance, which causes him to sound “a weak, obsequious bark”. This need and the wet substance itself are used by Yitzhak to mark the dog with his words, which in turn will resubordinate the dog.<sup>43</sup> As the word ‘crazy’ is added to the word ‘dog’, the latter is tainted with negative associations that immediately render the inscription much less mundane and redundantly true.<sup>44</sup> As Cohen shows, Yitzhak, a European Jew, racializes and classifies

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<sup>43</sup> The term is borrowed from Judith Butler: “Certain kinds of utterances, when delivered by those in a position of power against those who are already subordinated, have the effect of resubordinating”. Balak's original subordination is a function of the simple fact that he is a dog and Yitzhak – a man. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 26.

<sup>44</sup> Arpali discusses ‘dog’ as a meaningful if ambiguous cultural unit – on the one hand a despised creature, and on the other brave, loyal etc. – showing how much more than a mere physical object ‘dog’ is. “The dog does not enter the Agnonian novel as a creature free of meaning, since he already carries symbolic baggage due to the linguistic and cultural

Balak, a weaker native. He inscribes him with otherness “in two strokes – one that creates order and another that is self-empowering” – in a process that is emblematic of the colonial. Thus, Cohen suggests rethinking Balak as “the traumatic site of the psyche formed under colonial pressure”.<sup>45</sup> In the paradisiacal scene described by Benjamin, animals are similarly subordinate to man, who is “the lord of nature”. But whereas Adam translates correctly, mediating between the silent language of things and the infinite word of God, Yitzhak’s ‘translation’ of the dog’s need and desire is both defective and cruel, the first of many mistranslations that will be applied to Balak.

The combination ‘crazy dog’ is indeed original and creative, being more than just a repetition of an already given name. As a description, a constative, Yitzhak’s inscription is both wrong and inexplicable. It is only as a *performative utterance* that the words and their writing can begin to make sense. Unlike constatives, which are true or false, performative, as I discussed in chapter 1, are either successful or unsuccessful. In order to distinguish ‘happy’ utterances from ‘unhappy’ ones, Austin reaches for extra-linguistic mechanisms that might help him to hermetically define the “total situation” and “total context” of the performative utterance. “The occasion of an utterance matters seriously”, Austin writes, and “the words used are to some extent to be

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systems from which – and not zoology – he mainly comes”. Cohen notes that the dog carries “the weight of a discourse in which it is seen as an impure animal, a figure of derided alterity, permitted only grudgingly by rabbinical literature”. Arpali, *Rav-roman*, 174; Cohen, “A Hebrew Dog”, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Cohen, “A Hebrew Dog”, 6-7.

'explained' by the 'context' in which they are designed to be or have been spoken".<sup>46</sup> Indeed, for Balak, the question of context will turn out to be crucial.

The inscription 'crazy dog' is almost a theoretical experiment of the "total context" Austin demands for the identification of a successful performative utterances, since two dichotomous classes of readers interpret it. The first class is that of the inhabitants of the novel, who read the inscription in ignorance of the 'original' context of the moment of its creation, and the second includes the novel's readers, to whom this original context is emphatically transparent. Unlike most of the fictive readers of the inscription, Agnon's readers, who are aware of the circumstances in which the inscription is produced as well as of the fact that the dog is not described by the narrator as crazy, understand Yitzhak's words within a saturated literary context: metaphors and similes, Yitzhak's thoughts during the encounter and the narrator's account of it, events that precede the scene and ones that follow it.

Austin's utopic vision of "total context" is made up of six conditions for success affecting a performative. Of these, the most debated and contested are "intention" and "conventional procedure" (elsewhere called "ritual"), both of which recur in the case of Yitzhak's writing. Derrida's reading of Austin puts much stress on the element of the "conscious presence of the intention of the speaking subject", which he claims is "one of those essential elements – and not one among others".<sup>47</sup> Such intention is nearly impossible to achieve, at least in the strict 'total' sense Austin aspires to. "In order for a context to be exhaustively determinable, in the sense required by Austin",

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<sup>46</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, 100.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 14.

Derrida shows, “conscious intention would at the very least have to be totally present and immediately transparent to itself and to others”.<sup>48</sup>

A variety of performative options unfolds before the ‘contextualized’ readers of the words ‘crazy dog’, all implied by the narrator in various places and manners: a joke, a work of art, an injurious name – a curse, and excommunication.<sup>49</sup> The possibility that Yitzhak “meant it only as a joke”<sup>50</sup> is brought up by the narrator at the very end of the novel to underscore the disproportion between his act and the “punishment” he has received. Yet apart perhaps from Yitzhak in the moment of creation, no one else reading his words seems to be amused.<sup>51</sup> It isn't clear what status should be given to the narrator's decisive retroactive comment regarding Yitzhak's intention when he wrote what he wrote. During the scene itself, the issue of intention, or rather the resonating lack thereof, is introduced three times, twice in regard to Yitzhak and once to Balak, suggesting that even the dog, but especially the painter, had no single, determinable intention when the writing took place. Thus, intention is present in the writing scene as an issue that troubles the narrator,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Curiously, at least two of these categories are treated by Austin as uses of language that are “not serious”, “not fully normal”, as “parasitic uses”. In his effort to define the illocutionary speech act (as part of his later, reconsidered taxonomy, to which I will return), he concludes that joking and writing poetry are not done “as conforming to a convention”. Austin also includes in these non-serious acts “swearing”, which comes rather close to cursing. His view on this point seems particularly untenable, and has indeed drawn criticism from, among others, Derrida, with respect to the artistic use of language. Austin, *How to Do*, 104-106; Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 13-19.

<sup>50</sup> The Hebrew says he “intended it only as a joke” (*nitkaven*), the verb stemming from the same root as ‘intention’ and not of ‘meaning’. *Tmol Shilsom*, 462.

<sup>51</sup> When Yitzhak paints for the children (in a passage I referred to earlier) creativity and humor are also correlated: “He jests and draws funny pictures, sometimes to astonish people and sometimes to please them” (138).

who is trying to grasp it, only to come up with a mixture of fragmented and perhaps contradictory intentions.

The words 'crazy dog' can also be conceived, and indeed are by Yitzhak, as an artistic expression. Upon meeting the dog, Yitzhak finally succumbs to the artistic impulse that always existed in him. As Miron points out, at this moment the hidden artist in Yitzhak bursts from him in an eruption, resulting in his only 'great' creation.<sup>52</sup> Arbel notes that the depiction of the moment of writing is similar to the description of the mystical experience of the artist at the moment of creation in other Agnon texts whose protagonists are artists, and she emphasizes that with Yitzhak more than with these other artists it is obvious that the force that governs the creator is not external to him but stems from his inner soul.<sup>53</sup> Yitzhak, however, is not a true artist, as Bloykof recognizes. Yitzhak senses that true artistic creation goes beyond the literal, descriptive representation of facts, but his problematic interpretation of the mandatory 'gap' between object and work is encapsulated in the adding of the false adjective.

As a work of art, Balak brings to mind René Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe".<sup>54</sup> The seemingly contradictory caption, "This is not a pipe", holds true insofar as Magritte offered not a

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<sup>52</sup> Miron, "Mimashal lesipur", 99.

<sup>53</sup> Arbel, *Katuv 'al 'oro*, 227.

<sup>54</sup> Miron was the first to draw a link between Magritte's work and Yitzhak's. Dan Miron, "Bein shtei neshamot: ha'analogia hafaustit beTmol shilshom leS.Y. Agnon" [Between two Souls: the Faustian Analogy in S. Y. Agnon's *Only Yeterday*] in *Mivilna leYerushalayim* [From Vilna to Jerusalem], eds. David Asaf, Israel Bartal, et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002), 559.

pipe but a painting, an image of a pipe.<sup>55</sup> Yitzhak's work, by contrast, juxtaposes the actual object with its linguistic representation, therefore, in his case, this *is* (in fact) a dog. The 'real' whose absence Magritte's work revolves around is emphatically present in Yitzhak's 'piece'. The priority of sign over object is demonstrated not through the sign's independence from the object, its failure to touch upon it, but quite the contrary, through their hermetic link, through the drastic success of the sign in affecting the object. Not only can the sign touch the object and adhere to it, it can even change and mold it, indicating the dominance of the representational over the real.

When it is completed, Yitzhak is pleased with his 'work' and thinks of his act in terms of its originality: "Yitzhak looked at the dog and was happy. When our Rabbis in the Land of Israel excommunicated a person they would tie notes to the tails of black dogs saying, So-and-So is excommunicated, and they would send the dogs throughout the city to warn the people to stay away from him. But never before had anyone written on the skin of a dog" (287).<sup>56</sup> Then the simile of an artist is repeated once again, this time in relation to the 'publication' and 'publicity' of the work: "Yitzhak looked here and there like an artist whose artistry has succeeded and looks to see if people have noticed it". As it happened, "there wasn't a person outside [...]. But he consoled himself with the thought that they would see later on. He kicked the dog to make him wander around the city and advertise his deed" (ibid).

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<sup>55</sup> When Magritte was asked about this image, he replied that of course it was not a pipe, just try to fill it with tobacco. Ellen Handler Spitz, *Museums of the Mind: Magritte's Labyrinth and Other Essays in the Arts* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994), 47.

<sup>56</sup> This praise for originality ("never before [...]") seems to reflect Yitzhak's own perception, since it is immediately followed by its refutation: "But there is no new thing under the sun, everything man does and will do has already been done before him and before that. And Jerusalem still recalls that once they excommunicated a sage who wanted to correct the Yishuv against the will of the Keepers of the Walls, and they brought a pack of dogs and wrote on their skin, Heretic, Banned and Excommunicated" (287).

Yitzhak's hunger for publicity drives him to perform an act of physical violence and kick the dog. But violence was in fact present in the scene from its very beginning. When he first meets Balak, Yitzhak, we are told, "picked up one of his brushes and didn't know if he wanted to threaten the dog with it or if he wanted to wipe it off on the dog's skin". Under the pretence of a lack of specific intention, two aims are suggested: violence and exploitation. Together with artistic impulse and sheer amusement, both these elements govern the scene from its start. Moreover, when Yitzhak contemplates the originality of his creation he compares it to the excommunication notes tied, according to custom, to the tails of dogs, thereby situating his act, even in his own mind, within the context of an oppressive cultural convention of rejection and exclusion. These three elements – Yitzhak's preformed intention, which is at least partially malicious, the excommunication ritual, and the physical kick – all serve to contextualize the writing of the words 'crazy dog', which is itself an act of hostility, of "calling names" in the sense of the term elaborated by Judith Butler.

Butler turns to both Austin and Althusser to explore the injurious, performative power of language, and especially of names. The question that launches her discussion might well have been posed directly about Balak: "Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms?"

"To be called a name", Butler observes, "is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns". For Balak, indeed, being called a name is the first form of injury – linguistic or other – that he encounters (as far as the narrative goes) but far from the last. Yet being called a name, according

to Butler, “is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language”, which is precisely what happens to Balak, who will henceforth gradually turn into a subject.<sup>57</sup>

#### 4.

Yitzhak’s first kick does not send the dog running to “advertise his deed”. He looks at Yitzhak in amazement, seemingly hurt and disappointed, but keeps following him, raising his head toward the brush, until Yitzhak “hit his leg and it bled”, after which the dog finally “picked up his feet and started running” (288). Like the rabbi’s letter in “And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight” so too Yitzhak’s writing cuts itself off from its producer and “continues to produce effects independently of his presence and of the present actuality of his intentions”.<sup>58</sup> But Balak’s predicament is an almost polar opposite of Menashe Hayim’s. In the latter’s case, the index separates from its referent, while in the former’s, a text adheres relentlessly to its referent. Yitzhak’s words are emphatically a “mark that subsists”, that “carries with it a force that breaks with its context” and “possesses a characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if

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<sup>57</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 1-2. Pierre Bourdieu writes, in the same context, that “[t]here is no social agent who does not aspire, as far his circumstances permit, to have the power to name and to create the world through naming: gossip, slander, lies, insults, commendations, criticism, arguments and praises are all daily petty manifestations of the solemn and collective acts of naming, be they celebrations, or condemnations, which are performed by generally recognized authorities”. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Mathew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 105.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 5.



[we] do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say”.<sup>59</sup> Above all, it is a mark that is read over and over again, cited and reiterated.

Kicked for the second time, Balak sets out running through the streets of Jerusalem, creating panic and receiving “ounces of iron and liters of stones” (289). The frightened residents of the orthodox neighborhood Meah Shearim proceed to hide in their homes, leaving their shops unattended.<sup>60</sup> At first, Balak is not hungry and does not take advantage of the access to food, but when his hunger overcomes him, “all Meah Shearim [comes] out with wooden instruments and stone instruments and ceramic instruments and glass instruments, and with pots and pans, with jugs and jars, with tins of kerosene and stoves of earthenware”, and so on.<sup>61</sup>

Everyone who sees Balak interprets the words on his skin as another kind of performative: a warning. In Austin’s discussion of explicit and implicit performatives, he notes that from the point of view of the evolution of language, some primary utterances may be seen as implicit performatives: for example, in a primitive language of one-word utterances the word ‘bull’ could constitute a warning.<sup>62</sup> Austin returns to the ‘bull’ example, for instance in his discussion of certain “operative

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Arpali wonders how it is possible for members of a community that regularly uses dogs to distribute excommunication notes to see such an inscription and fail to identify it as a jest. This and other similar concerns about the credibility of the novel's events plot (can a dog prefer Kosher food? can rabies develop in this particular way?) impel him into a discussion of Balak’s symbolic meanings. The line Arpali draws between non-realism and symbolism seems untenable to me. Moreover, even realistic fiction need not display the level of realism Arpali demands. Arpali, *Rav-roman*, 184-85.

<sup>61</sup> Butler shows that the metaphor of physical injury is often employed in the discourse of injurious speech. But physical injury is also a literal option: “If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence”. In Balak’s case the physical injury is indeed not metaphorical but rather the most immediate result of the linguistic injury. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 4-5.

<sup>62</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, 71-72.

words” that are implied within a performative but do not actually need to be uttered, such as the word ‘dangerous’ before the warning ‘bull’.<sup>63</sup> As a warning, ‘crazy dog’ belongs to a sub-set of performatives of which Austin says that in order for them to be successful, “certain statement have *to be true*”.<sup>64</sup> The success of these performatives depends on the veracity of a constative utterance. ‘(This is a) crazy dog’ is the implied statement that must be held as true if the warning against the dog is to be felicitous. And indeed, those who encounter Balak not only take his craziness for a fact, i.e., believe him to be actually mad, they also interpret the inscription as unequivocally referring to him, understanding the physical connection between the dog and the words as standing for an indexical relation. Unlike the case of the excommunication notes tied to the tails of black dogs, and even unlike the case of such a note painted on the dogs’ skin, Balak is not only the ‘messenger’ of his inscription but also its referent.

Furthermore, the warning performative ‘(beware, a dangerous) crazy dog’ is not only dependent upon the constative ‘(this is a) crazy dog’ but also, in its outward appearance, as a piece of writing, identical to it. The same two words can form a description of the dog, a warning against him, or both, as well as several other utterances that relate to him. The difficulty Austin faces in attempting to define and demarcate the category of performative utterances is precisely this absence of any formal grammatical criterion to distinguish the constative from the performative. From the very outset Austin asserts that “many utterances that look like statements are either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straightforward information about the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 45.

facts". The first example he offers for the "Preliminary Isolation of the Performative" are utterances that belong plainly in the grammatical category of the statement.<sup>65</sup> Later on, however, Austin gives up on the possibility of formally distinguishing the performative from the constative, concluding that to state something is to do something with words no less than to ask, order, promise, etc. He then turns to a new categorization, of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts that one may perform when saying something. The assumption that the words 'crazy dog' are meant as a statement that imparts information about the dog is therefore only one of many possible understandings of these words. Nonetheless, this particular interpretative option rears its head in the story whenever the question of truth infiltrates the realm of the performative — where it does not properly belong.

"To be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context", says Butler, who, like Derrida, tackles Austin's demand to locate and identify an utterance within a "total speech situation" in order to know what makes its force effective.<sup>66</sup> With Derrida, Butler understands the loss of context as an inherent, structural possibility, an essential rather than an accidental, risk. Thus, it seems to her that "part of what constitutes the 'total speech situation' is a failure to achieve a totalized form in any of

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<sup>65</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, 2-5. The second out of these examples is "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' — as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem".

<sup>66</sup> Both Butler and Derrida object to the restriction of the 'speech act' and interpellation to spoken language, an objection that is highly relevant to Yitzhak's written utterance. Derrida's entire "Signature Event Context" can be read as a shifting of the notion of the performative to the domain of writing, with all that follows: iterability, the absence of the 'receiver' and then of the 'sender', the break from context, etc. Butler wishes to correct Althusser's restriction of the notion of interpellation to the action of voice. To her, interpellation must be dissociated from the figure of the voice while the efficacy of the written language has to be brought into account. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 32-33.

its given instances". While Derrida emphasizes the element of intention within the demand for 'total context', Butler focuses on the crucial element of convention or ritual that Austin requires for a felicitous performative. She questions whether it is possible to delimit the 'convention' that the utterance presumes, arguing that a moment of ritual is never a single moment but "a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instant of utterance".<sup>67</sup>

Balak suffers a severe loss of context. The words he carries on his back were manufactured as an amalgam of several 'conventions': a signboard, a memory stone, a work of art, a joke, and an excommunication note; but none of these conventions are delimited or even recognized when he is being read, resulting in the inevitable failure of his readers to reconstruct the 'total speech situation' in which the words were produced.

Even the linguistic formula that Yitzhak uses deviates from convention. The words 'crazy dog' (*kelev meshuga*), which resemble but are not identical to the expression 'mad dog' (*kelev shote*), suggest, at the narrative level, the poverty of Yitzhak's language. At the semiotic level, the linguistic deviation, which the narrator later refers to as a 'distortion', might seemingly have exempted the dog from a literal reading; for what exactly is a 'crazy dog' to begin with? According to Umberto Eco, we can accept factual judgments like 'this pencil is blue' or 'this man sings' because pencils are often colored and men can emit sounds; these are *acceptable* factual, "index sensitive" judgments. On the other hand, 'this pencil is two miles long' or 'this man is moved by a four stroke

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 2-4.

engine' are abnormal factual judgments because they nourish what Eco calls an inner semantic incompatibility. Such incompatibilities can be resolved in one of two ways: either the pencil is not really two miles long and we are dealing with a (simple, unproblematic) case of an untrue expression, or else the pencil is indeed two miles long, in which case a further factual statement is needed (for example, that "some pencils are two miles long") that would force us to update the semantic properties of the sign 'pencil', thereby resolving the incompatibility.<sup>68</sup>

The fact that Yitzhak's words present a linguistic abnormality might have led Balak's readers to assume that the dog is 'not really crazy' and therefore 'not really dangerous'. Instead, to overcome the abnormality, the readers perform the second scenario described by Eco: buoyed by the proximity of 'mad' and 'crazy', they assimilate the unfamiliar sign into the already familiar category.

Had Balak been read within the context of a work of art or a joke, had he, for instance, been displayed in a museum like Magritte's pipe, violence and persecution would have been averted. Even the works of Arzef the taxidermist, who uses the mightiest power of all and the most extreme form of violence to turn his living objects into an exemplar of their species by abstracting them of their concreteness, are displayed in a museum and given artistic context. They become 'A hyena', 'A fox', rather than a particular living creature, not unlike the abstract concepts that form the objects of Bloykof's work. Yitzhak's creation, on the contrary, involves turning an ordinary, anonymous dog into a unique individual.

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<sup>68</sup> Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1976), 169.

Paradoxically, even with a reading in the context of an injurious name, a curse, Balak might have been better off than with the total lack of context in which he is ultimately read. Because the readers don't understand Yitzhak's words as an act of verbal violence – physical violence is inflicted.

Yitzhak's act is indeed an efficacious performative – at least as a "perlocutionary" act, whose essence, according to Austin is "*the achieving of certain effects by saying something*".<sup>69</sup> According to Austin's later categorization, while the locutionary act is "'saying something' in the full normal sense",<sup>70</sup> the illocutionary and perlocutionary are both speech acts. In the illocutionary act, "**in saying something we do something**"; the illocutionary "has a certain *force* in saying something". The perlocutionary, on the other hand, is an act that produces certain **consequences**.<sup>71</sup> Whereas the illocutionary act is necessarily "conventional" ("an act done as conforming to a convention"), and even "ritual or ceremonial", the perlocutionary is explicitly *not* conventional.<sup>72</sup> Butler's reading of Austin stresses the element of convention or ritual as well as that of temporality: while the illocutionary produces effects without any lapse of time, the effect of the perlocutionary is temporally distinct from the act itself.<sup>73</sup> For Austin, the consequential nature of the perlocutionary and the temporal gap between the act and its effects make it particularly prone to "unintentional"

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<sup>69</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, 94.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 121; 109. In Butler's clear articulation: "The illocutionary speech act is itself the deed that it effects; the perlocutionary merely leads to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself". Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 3.

<sup>72</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, 105; 121.

<sup>73</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 17.

results. He distinguishes between cases in which “the speaker intends to produce an effect [but] it may nevertheless not occur” and those “when he does not intend to produce it or intends not to produce it [but] it may nevertheless occur”.<sup>74</sup>

Both forms of infelicity apply to Yitzhak’s words, which produce unintended effects while failing to produce the intended ones, or at least some of them. His act is certainly unconventional, but nonetheless corresponds simultaneously with several conventions, most explicitly the excommunication ritual involving dogs. And indeed, ‘crazy dog’ overtly operates as a perlocutionary act: it brings about an effect – Balak’s violent persecution and banishment from the Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem. But is it only perlocutionary?

Over the course of the second half of *Only Yesterday* Balak is gradually transformed from an ordinary dog<sup>75</sup> into a unique creature characterized by an evolving cognition and progressing madness. If once he was only a “simple dog and wasn’t concerned with what was beyond his understanding” (496), later “an intelligent mind entered into him and started thinking thoughts” (499). The more Balak tries to understand, the crazier he becomes. Indeed, one could say that in Balak’s case, the ‘losing’ of the mind is closely intertwined with the ‘gaining’ of the mind. Boaz Arpali offers an extensive analysis of this evolvment, which he describes as a process of intellectualization

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<sup>74</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, 106.

<sup>75</sup> As Kurzweil points out, if there is something that distinguishes this dog, paradoxically it is the fact that he is so casual and indefinite. Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey*, 104.

that is also a process of becoming mad and a fool (the last two terms are captured by the single Hebrew word *shote*, making the distinction between them difficult).<sup>76</sup>

By being called an injurious name, Butler shows, one is not simply fixed by this name, not just derogated and demeaned: “One is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate the call”.<sup>77</sup> Butler asks if the injurious speech act is perlocutionary or illocutionary and presents a model that espouses the latter category, since hateful utterances do not describe injury and subordination or produce them as a consequence, but perform the injury itself and constitute the subject in a subordinate position at the very moment of their utterance. However, the structural possibility of ‘infelicity’, or ‘misfire’ as Austin puts it elsewhere, is ever present: speech acts can go wrong in various ways, producing consequences that are unintentional and unpredictable. One type of ‘misfire’ Austin considers is “unintentional insult”, but Butler turns this notion on its head to examine what occurs when injury was intentional and something else ‘misfires’, thus revisiting the question of what constitutes the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of a given utterance. The hate speech, Butler shows, not only substantiates the social structure in which it is uttered, it can also potentially undermine and alter it. If the injurious name acts as an illocution, fulfilling an interpellative function (here Butler conflates Austin with Althusser), it creates a subject that is not only subordinate but also a participant in the social structure, possibly a subversive one, a user of language who can now, in turn, call names and not only be called.

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<sup>76</sup> Arpali , *Rav-roman*, 200-01.

<sup>77</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 2.



Balak's transformation into an intelligent creature is also his becoming a social being, a subject, and – at least to some extent – a linguistic subject. He is in many ways a kind of 'theoretical experiment' of interpellation precisely because he is a non-subject – a 'pure' individual, in Althusser's terminology, abruptly transformed into a subject. Although Althusser's famous formulation states that "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects", he immediately admits that "an individual is always already a subject, even before he is born"; even an unborn child is "appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived".<sup>78</sup> In this sense, prior to his meeting with Yitzhak Balak is even less of a subject than an unborn child, yet immediately after the writing takes place we observe what Butler calls the "conferral of identity through the self ascription of guilt":<sup>79</sup> "The dog raised his voice and shouted, Arf Arf, What is my sin and what is my crime, what do you want from me and what evil did I do you?" (292-93).

Once he escapes the Jewish neighborhoods where he is persecuted and settles "among the Gentiles" Balak seems to regain a canine, peaceful existence, playing "with his comrades", the dogs, eating, and enjoying blessed anonymity. "But his pleasure wasn't complete, for all those days his thought was bound to Meah Shearim". Gradually, Balak comes to realize that he is persecuted only among the Jews of Jerusalem, his misery inflicted within certain limited linguistic and cultural circumstances. "In the end, he came to the conclusion that there must be some trace of a defect in

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<sup>78</sup> Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 173; 176.

<sup>79</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power; Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 107. In this text, Butler's reading of Althusser emphasizes the aspect of self-inflicted guilt as the primal stage and condition of successful interpellation: "The interpellative call is the entrance into language through the self appropriation of guilt". Ibid.

him that made folks hate him [...]. If so, why is it that the Children of Israel see his flaw and the Gentiles don't see his flaw? Or perhaps the flaw in him is a flaw in the eyes of the Children of Israel but for the others it isn't a flaw" (295-96).<sup>80</sup>

This question of his flaw that is not objective but a matter of reading and interpretation "pierced his brain and confused his mind and sapped his strength and didn't let him rest either by day or by night" (Ibid) until finally, in search of answers, he is driven back to where his flaw is recognized. Balak's attraction to the site of his persecution receives several explanations in the text, including his longing for kosher meat and a wish to die where he was born, but above all is described as a need to understand, to solve the existential and cultural enigma that is slowly revealed to him. His newly acquired consciousness and conscience do not allow him to stay for long where his body suffers no harm. Once interpellated, made into a subordinate social subject, Balak can no longer rest content with a convenient canine existence and is impelled by a mighty force to participate in the social structure within which he is oppressed and 'guilty', but also recognized.

Gradually the dog develops an ability to make logical and causal inductions, allowing him to trace the chain of events that led to his persecution back to its origin – the meeting with Yitzhak and the production of the text: "He saw strange signs. It came to him that those signs were the handiwork of the owner of the instrument [...]. But all his pains were in vain because he couldn't

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<sup>80</sup> There are also several Jews who do not 'see the flaw', including a group of Hassidim too drunk to read, a blind old man, and a woman who cannot read without the Hebrew vowel signs. Their indifferent response to Balak brings him to believe that "his flaw was repaired and that he no longer had anything to fear", a conclusion that would soon be overturned with yet more violence directed at him (300).

read. He was amazed and stunned, Everyone who sees me knows the truth about me,<sup>81</sup> and I **who possess the truth itself, I don't know what it is**" (302-03).

Discussing the relation between "signs" and "truth" in this passage, Hasak-Lowy argues that their meanings evolve: "truth", at first, refers only to Balak's knowing what is written on him, to becoming familiar with the signifier; then, in the segmented quoted above, the meanings of "signs" and "truth" diverge, with "signs" referring to something that exists independently of them, something that is real and true; and finally, Hasak-Lowy writes, "all mention of the 'signs' disappears, and Balak comes to understand what is written on him as 'the truth'". This truth, he adds, according to Balak's understanding, is transparent; it is both external and internal, linguistic and bodily. Unknowingly, Balak renders the distinction between signifier and referent as well as its breakdown.<sup>82</sup> Balak's entrance into language, or at least his understanding that there is a language to which he has not yet gained access, is automatically correlated with the understanding of the linguistic utterance as belonging to the realm of truth and lie and, moreover, with the assumption that it is true. Though unable to read, Balak is inclined to 'read' the words written *on* him as the *truth in* him, which eventually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As Ezrahi shows, Balak's consciousness is shared only by the narrator and the readers. None of the inhabitants of the novel, including Yitzhak, reads him as a conscious being. The dog becomes a sentient but not a talking animal and therefore does not disturb the realistic texture of the novel for any of its characters. "Unlike an animal in a fable [...] Balak remains in all his behaviors fully

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<sup>81</sup> In Hebrew: "the truth **in me**". *Tmol shilshom*, 223.

<sup>82</sup> Hasak-Lowy, "Mad Dog's Attack", 174.

canine”.<sup>83</sup> But does Balak know the language he cannot speak? After becoming “sentient”, is he mute like a person or like a dog? The highly intricate articulation of his thoughts suggests the former. Indeed, part of Balak’s evolving cognition consists in an improving ability to name things rather than just to describe them; “the man with the wet instrument” (302) later becomes “the man with the brush” (625). Thus, Balak’s misfortune is linguistic not only in the sense of being caused by words but also because he becomes a linguistic subject, a subject of language, who nonetheless cannot fully participate in it since he cannot ‘speak properly’.<sup>84</sup> The boundaries of the ‘realistic’ limit him, allowing him to reach the very edge of language but not to enter.

Standing at the gates of the Alliance school in Jerusalem, the dog believes that the truth he is looking for is to be found there: “The teachers will come out soon and reveal the truth” (303). It is there that Balak becomes a text in search of a reader, an interpreter, and there that he will once again be named, this time with a proper name.<sup>85</sup>

## 5.

When the school bell rings, the principal comes out and the dog “jumped at him and licked his stick and looked at that gentleman with pleading eyes”.

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<sup>83</sup> Ezrahi, “Sentient Dogs”, 123.

<sup>84</sup> Butler notes that, to become a subject of ideology, one acquires skills that are “above all, *the skills of speech*”, and shows how Althusser “links the emergence of a consciousness – and a conscience – with the problem of speaking properly”. Butler, *Psychic Life*, 115.

<sup>85</sup> As mentioned earlier, naming is one of Austin’s first examples of performative utterances. Austin, *How to Do*, 4-5.

And he held himself out like an ignoramus who holds out a letter to the expert to hear what is written there, and all the while he whispers, Please sir, see what is written here. The principal saw letters, took a pair of glasses and matched them up with his eyes and started reading, as was his wont from left to right. He connected the letters and joined them: BLK, and read Balak. He smiled and said, The people of Jerusalem are experts in Humash and know that there was a wicked man Balak and so they name their dogs after him. He patted the dog's head and chirped at him, Balak [...].<sup>86</sup> And the dog heard that he called him Balak and was amazed, but not offended. (303)

The scene of reading in many ways echoes the original scene of writing. Yet this time, the dog, who is already an intelligent being, knows what he needs and wants from the person facing him. If, before, Yitzhak was the clerk stroking the paper before writing on it, now the paper, the writing, holds itself out before its future reader. The bilingual principal applies the rules of one language to a text written in another, yielding a reading, a translation, that is erroneous on several different levels. The letters are read in reverse order, from left to right, and the name Balak ends with the letter *kuf*, whereas the word *kelev* (dog) begins with *kaf*. Although spelled differently, these two consonants sound the same, while the vowels, although invisible, are altered, as well as the pronunciation of the letter *bet*. Finally, after the name is 'read', and in fact created – like the madness of the dog – a retroactive motivation is ascribed to the name as the dog is said to have been named after the biblical king of Moab.<sup>87</sup> Balak's name is thus created in and from confusion, as an intralingual translation<sup>88</sup> (deriving, however, from the bilingualism of the principal) that

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<sup>86</sup> Here Harshav adds an explanatory sentence that does not appear in the Hebrew text: "But from right to left, the Hebrew letters read: KLB, dog". In Hebrew, both words, *kelev* (dog) and Balak, consist of three letters. The different location in the word turns the letter *bet* from the consonant V into B.

<sup>87</sup> The story of Balak King of Moab and the prophet Balaam is told in Numbers 22-25 and involves a speaking donkey. Ezrahi offers a comprehensive reading of Agnon's Balak in comparison to the biblical one, as well as to the binding of the biblical Yitzhak. Ezrahi, "Sentient Dogs".

<sup>88</sup> To use Jakobson's term.

confuses one name thereby creating another.<sup>89</sup> In Derrida's reading of the biblical scene of linguistic confusion, Babel, as a proper name, is untranslatable. But 'Babel' also has a common meaning, "a conceptual generality", and it is therefore "at once proper name and common noun [...], the one as the homonym of the other, the synonym as well, but not the equivalent". With Balak's name, as with 'Babel', "in the very tongue of the narrative there is a translation, a sort of transfer". In 'Babel' this transfer "gives immediately (by some confusion) the semantic equivalent of the proper name which, by itself, as a pure proper name, it would not have",<sup>90</sup> but in the case of 'Balak' the opposite occurs: the lexical meaning disappears, giving way to a "pure proper name" that carries only connotative meaning. Instead of an 'empty' name gaining descriptive content as in Russell's formulation, the (false) description becomes a name; instead of the paradisiacal name given by Adam ('dog') transforming into a general category, a noun, the noun transforms 'back' (in both the directional and the chronological sense) into a name.

Balak's meeting with the principal is a moment of naming disguised as 'mere' reading. While Yitzhak perhaps wished to repeat Adam's act and give the dog a name, he succeeds in this only vicariously, since his writing requires reading, or rather misreading, to create a proper name. And the errors that lead to Balak's name do not end here. Overlooking the word 'crazy' – failing to see it and failing to read it – is also essential to the principal's ability to sustain his reading of the name as such.

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<sup>89</sup> Shoshana Felman discusses both madness and literature as proceeding from a "failure of translation": "To speak about madness is to speak about the difference between languages: to import into one language the strangeness of another". Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>90</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 109.

'Crazy dog' can be examined in comparison to another unofficial name, or nickname: Sweet Foot (*Haregel hametuka*), who is one of Yitzhak's mentors. The name is a cross between a description and a joke, partly affectionate and partly derogatory, though not nearly as explicitly so as 'crazy dog'. 'Sweet Foot' is a play on the character's proper name, Yohanan Leichtfoos, meaning 'light foot' in German. The name is 'adjusted' or 'corrected' after the character's snake-bitten leg is saved by being wrapped in sweet halvah – and so "[t]hey started calling him Sweet Foot until his name stuck" (72). Derrida's notion of names as possessing and not possessing a common meaning, belonging and not belonging to language, and being translatable and untranslatable finds echoes in the original Hebrew text as well as its translation to English.

Despite being 'translatable', the name Leichtfoos appears in the Hebrew text as a transliteration of the German name and not in translation into Hebrew (*Regel kala*), leaving the readers to draw out the connection between the name and nickname on their own. But the novel's translator, Barbara Harshav, relying on the proximity between the German and the English, does translate the name, calling the character Yohanan Lightfoot.

Sweet Foot is not the only nickname in the novel. In Levi Yitzhak's hotel, for example, which Yitzhak visits, "everyone was known by name or nickname, like Father of Hair for his long hair and Father of Shirts because he took pride in his shirts at a time when nobody was fussy about clothing. And some called themselves by the name of the settlement where they found work" (431). Names as they appear in the novel are often mutable, repeatedly corrected and adjusted according to circumstances. Nicknames typically suggest some kind of description that better captures the

bearer than the original name. In the case of Balak's name, once again, an opposite process occurs. While his 'original' name, Crazy Dog, is a cruel play on the formula of a descriptive nickname, the adjustment (Balak) works the other way around and alters it into a proper name.

After misreading the word dog and un-reading the word crazy, the principal addresses the issue of intention, retroactively ascribing a fictive motivation to the naming, which he believes was previously performed by people other than himself: "The people of Jerusalem are experts in Humash and know that there was a wicked man Balak and so they name their dogs after him". The private, idiosyncratic moment of naming is understood by him not only as a moment that has already occurred, a moment in the past, but also as a ritual: the people of Jerusalem, as a matter of custom, "name their dogs" after Balak. Naming, as the principal demonstrates, can never escape convention and history. Although proper names are supposed to confer individuality and singularity, the name,<sup>91</sup> as Butler notes, "as a convention, has a generality and a historicity that is in no sense radically singular".<sup>92</sup> And so, as if through a back door, hostility reenters: the principal, whose singular reading 'frees' the dog of Yitzhak's hostile name-calling, nonetheless proceeds to interpret the new name, to 'conventionalize' it, in such a way that replaces the lexical injurious meaning of 'crazy dog' with the injurious connotative meaning of the name Balak.

And the dog heard that he called him Balak and was amazed, but not offended. Well then, we can call him Balak, too. And what was his name, perhaps he had a name

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<sup>91</sup> See Reinhartz, "Why Ask My Name", 4-6.

<sup>92</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 29.



and it sank and perhaps he didn't have a name, as in some communities, where a man whose sons don't survive doesn't name his son in order to confound the Angel of Death, so he won't know that there is a creature so-and-so. (303)

The narrator, following the dog, 'succumbs' to the interpellative procedure and agrees henceforth to use the name Balak,<sup>93</sup> while at the same time suggesting that the dog might well have had another, 'true' name, which has been forgotten. As if continuing the principal's 'adoption' of a name formerly given by the people of Jerusalem, the name is once again presented as a matter of convention or social agreement in which the narrator merely participates. Then, another ritual is mentioned: that of not naming a newborn to protect him from the Angel of death.<sup>94</sup> Thus, even the option of 'non naming' that emerged at the end of *A Simple Story* as a possible means of avoiding interpellation turns out to be yet another convention, one more Jewish ritual; even the anonymous, non-socialized option of the dog bearing no name whatsoever is incorporated into a social existence.

As is typical of the novel as a whole and even more so of the scenes that concern Balak, the interpretative difficulty here is considerable and the reader's footing seems especially unstable. Not only is it difficult to judge the extent of the narrator's sarcasm (is he ridiculing the principal's line of thought when he considers, for example, the possibility that the dog had a name "and it sank"?),

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<sup>93</sup> Butler notes that, in Althusser's scheme, the subject must 'turn around' in order for the interpellation to succeed, whereas to her, the linguistic constitution of the subject can take place without the subject's knowing. Balak, so it seems, does more than merely 'turn around', appearing to actively 'ask' for the writing and later the reading to take place; but since neither the writer nor the reader grant him what he is looking for, his subjection can ultimately be said to take place without his knowing. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 33.

<sup>94</sup> Agnon refers here to a known well-known Jewish custom of families plagued by repeated infant deaths. In addition to avoiding names altogether newborns were sometimes given names considered ugly or odd so as to repel the angel of death, or names implying old age (such as 'Alter' in Yidish) to trick the angel into thinking that the baby is grown up. Stahl, *Motza hashemot*, 76-77.

the very ontological status of the scene seems to be in question. The name Balak is used once – and only once – by the narrator prior to the scene at the Alliance school.<sup>95</sup> One explanation is that the narrator allows himself to disclose the name given by the principal before the event itself, a move that is not typical of his style but also not entirely inconsistent with his literary characterization.<sup>96</sup> Alternatively, the entire scene of the principal naming the dog Balak may be read as nothing but a false, retroactive rationalization of the name, much like the one the principal contrives when he ascribes the naming to the people of Jerusalem, constituting the scene as fiction within fiction. On either reading, Balak’s name constitutes and highlights the “edge of fiction” as well as the “edge of language”. Names exist in language and outside of it, as Derrida says, and they also exist on the borders of fiction, operating within and without it, emphasizing its factitiousness, its manufacture and construction.

Nor does the ontological uncertainty that pertains to the name Balak end once the dog and narrator accept the name. Even after this acceptance, it remains unclear whom, if anyone, among the inhabitants of the novel is aware of the name Balak or uses it. The Kripkean chain of reference is highly tenuous in this case, and it very possibly begins and ends in the moment of naming by the principal, rendering it a complete failure: a chain that can’t even be broken because it consists of only one link. Balak is a fictive name not only because it was invented by the principal, but also insofar as it is employed only by the narrator and does not participate, or even exist, in the narrated

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<sup>95</sup> “In the morning, Balak wondered, What is that?” (299).

<sup>96</sup> For example, as I mentioned earlier, he ‘foresees’ the writing on the dog’s skin in the chapter that precedes the event.

world. Yet here too, a single exception, which I describe in the following section, undermines this rule.

Unlike 'Balak', the name's 'origin', i.e. the words 'crazy dog', are read over and over again within the novel, turning Yitzhak's writing into a baptismal act followed, in true Kripkean form, by a detailed causal chain of reference. Balak's readership gradually expands beyond his immediate surroundings, a development that sets off a grotesque chain of interpretation with one reading leading to the next in ever widening circles not only of geography (the Jerusalem press, then that of Jaffa, then beyond Palestine) but also of disciplines. At this point, Miron observes, the problem of interpretation becomes itself a central thematic and conceptual element of the novel.<sup>97</sup>

Unlike the principal, these other readers do not really see the dog, don't actually read him. Their 'reading' thus consists in perpetual substitution, "signs of signs" that become increasingly remote from the dog as they accumulate. The painters of Jerusalem who "came up with the idea to paint the dog everybody was talking about [...] were so afraid, that they could not even paint a real dog, let alone Balak himself, and therefore painted 'a likeness of a likeness'"(490). And a few years later, "when the artists became famous, a few streets were named after them. Moreover, we gained other streets which were named after writers who wrote books about the painters" (Ibid). Thus the naming of the dog created an infinite chain of interpretation, substitution upon substitution, which leads, among other things, to a chain of naming.

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<sup>97</sup> Miron, "Mimashal lesipur", 95.

Despite the amplitude of artistic interpretations, visual as well as literary, inspired by Yitzhak's words on the dog, nobody reads the words themselves as a work of art. Balak is exploited as an allegory for various issues, primarily a debate about the Hebrew language but also the distribution of charity, the persecution of the Kingdom of Turkey, and even animal's rights. As Arpali notes, every sector sees in the dog whatever troubles it, and thus dialectically, its own reflection.<sup>98</sup> To his many interpreters Balak is no longer a living dog but a figurative representation of other, 'higher' issues. Unfortunately for the dog, however, the figurative readings do not exempt him from the literal one. "As long as they offended him with words and didn't hit his body, he feared neither the newspaper articles nor the scholarly studies [...]" (495), but in fact the hitting of the body continues in tandem with the offensive words. Indeed, what makes Balak such a paradigm of reading and interpretation (to heap on one more figurative exploitation of him) is precisely the fact that various levels of reading him can intersect in this way without canceling each other out.

In this respect, the readers of the novel who place Balak at the center of their interpretive effort are but another circle added onto the abundance of readers he already has within the novel. The meta-interpretive question of whether critics ought to try and figure out Balak's symbolic meanings or rather, as Eli Shavid proposed, renounce all symbolic readings and discuss him "from within his personality and his fate as one of the novel's characters",<sup>99</sup> as well as the question of

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<sup>98</sup> Arpali, *Rav-roman*, 208.

<sup>99</sup> Shavid, "Kelev hutzot", 285.

whether or not Balak deserves such a central role in the understanding of the novel,<sup>100</sup> sketches the contours of yet another interpretative circle.

Since the effort to read and understand him begins within the novel, and is depicted with radical sarcasm, a certain 'gray zone' is formed, which is still within the realm of fiction but already 'leaning out'. The interpretative work revolving around Balak is launched before the text ends, while at the same time a movement in the opposite direction also takes place: the readers of the novel are drawn into the novel's own proposed interpretations, as if every possible interpretation has already been anticipated by Agnon, articulated by him, and what is worse, severely ridiculed. But reading remains indispensable. Balak himself, as Miron indicates, exemplifies the fact that interpretation is not only an intellectual necessity but an existential one, a question of life and death. "Agnon may mock the interpretation of the art or of the text all he likes [...] but he himself, that is, his artistic creation, has awakened this interpretative impulse [...]. Life can go on without interpretation only so long as it is bestial and instinctual [...]. The interpretation and the longing for meaning are a universal and fatal element of life".<sup>101</sup>

The sarcastic depiction of Balak's successive readings and interpretations culminates in a rather convoluted argument offered by the narrator himself, in which he 'proves' that the entire Balak affair never took place. It is here that the name Balak is used once by someone other than the narrator.

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<sup>100</sup> Arpali, *Rav-roman*, 160

<sup>101</sup> Miron, "Ha'analogia hafaustit", 560; "Mimashal lesipur", 94-96.

And you can't bring a counter argument from what was written on his skin, Crazy Dog, for precisely here it is easy to prove that there is nothing here, for according to the rules of the language, it should have said Mad Dog – it is a distortion, and if it is a distortion, the whole issue is a distortion, and is as if it were zero. And even his name itself belies it, as one diligent critic proved that the Jews are not wont to call animals by names, while he was called Balak. Hence, it is clear that this does not allude to an event that occurred, but there is a hint here that has not yet been understood by scholars and it warrants study. (495)

Names, we learn here, or at least Balak's name, defy "the rules of the language" (crazy instead of mad), and moreover, they defy the rules of naming (dogs are not named). Two semiotic 'distortions', reminiscent of Austin's infelicities, are thus described here and used to support the conclusion that if the sign does not obey convention it is a defective sign that cannot possibly refer to an actual event or object – hence the event never occurred. But whereas Austin's skepticism concerned the ability of an impaired speech act to function successfully, here the directionality and causality of its failure are inverted ad absurdum. If the sign is unconventional, i.e. defective, the argument goes, then its ability to signify extra-linguistic facts is hindered (not necessarily a valid inference), therefore these extra-linguistic facts lose their ontological validity, and cease to exist. Notwithstanding its twisted logic and obvious sarcasm, this remark about the fictiveness of events is worthy of consideration. The naming of Balak, or rather his misnaming, is linked here to the fictiveness of his existence – it forms the grounds for understanding the status of Balak's story as fiction, a status acknowledged by the fictive narrator. For if "this does not allude to an event that occurred", then it alludes to an even that didn't occur – a fictional event. Once again the relation between name and story, name and fiction, is established, but here it involves the total disparagement of stories (and also perhaps of names, or at least 'fictive names', 'distorted names') as nothing – "zero".

## 6.

As the novel approaches its end, the words 'crazy dog' gain drastic power over Balak, transforming him from a regular dog into a crazy one, thus effecting a tangible and indeed extreme change in extra-linguistic facts. As Miron articulates this semiotic transformation: "The sign took over the referent and altered its content; being gave in to word. Eventually Balak became a crazy dog and full agreement was achieved between him and the inscription on his skin".<sup>102</sup> Balak's gradual deterioration in body and mind turns him into a dog that is indeed crazy, and also mad.<sup>103</sup>

As the terrible filth, thirst, and physical abuse escalate, his evolving cognition becomes more and more manic and troubled, and the confrontation of his human consciousness with the awful persecution leads to emotions of insult and bewilderment. His physical symptoms – constant howling, inability to touch food or drink, extreme sensitivity to sounds and odors, his bloodshot eyes, and so on – all receive an emotional or intellectual explanation – though they are always also perfectly sustainable as indications of rabies in realistic terms, that is, without recourse to anthropomorphism.

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<sup>102</sup> Miron, "Mimashal lesipur", 97.

<sup>103</sup> Golomb-Hoffman contends that the dog may or may not be rabid, claiming that Balak's rabies, though taken for granted by most critics, cannot be accounted for in terms of either veterinary medicine or animal psychology. It seems to me, however, that Golomb-Hoffman demands the kind of evidence that fiction need not provide. Agnon's depiction of the Balak's deterioration in his final days is an elaborate literary portrait of a rabid dog. Golomb-Hoffman, *Between Exile*, 128.

This duality is consistent with Ezrahi's observation that the fantastic in *Only Yesterday* is experienced only by the reader, while "nothing challenges the premises of realism from the point of view of the inhabitants of the novel".<sup>104</sup> Thus, while the residents of the novel see a dog that seems mad, i.e. rabid, to the readers, familiar with the emotional and cognitive aspects of his downfall and not just the physical ones, Balak is crazy.<sup>105</sup>

The self-destructive force that impels Balak time and again to return to the Jewish neighborhoods becomes increasingly focused on his wish to meet Yitzhak, whom he has already identified as the source of his misery. His fantasies about the future meeting are a blend of vengeance and the need to know, to understand. Balak's obsessive quest to find the 'truth' becomes more and more specific, as well as dangerous, as the novel progresses. At first, he believes that anyone reading the signs on his skin will be able to tell it to him; later he realizes that only Yitzhak, the writer of the text, its producer, could explain his misery to him; and upon their final meeting Balak wishes to ask Yitzhak "Why and what for" have all the "troubles" and "torments" been inflicted on him, but he realizes that his limited linguistic skills will yield no answer: "His heart screamed inside him, Here he [Yitzhak] is standing right close by, ask him. His spirit drooped much lower than it was, for he knew that if he asked, the man wouldn't answer him" (627). The lethal bite, then, is performed not from the canine position of a rabid dog but by a frustrated linguistic subject, who has been named and thereby given access to social existence but whose access is

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<sup>104</sup> Ezrahi, "Sentient Dogs", 130.

<sup>105</sup> This is not to say that as a 'realistic' dog Balak has no emotions but rather that the emotions ascribed to him appear to exceed what Golomb-Hoffman calls "animal psychology".



limited and does not allow him full participation in the social structure (which he seems to understand more keenly than its human participants) and in “proper speech”. Finally, the mouth that cannot speak out must bite: “I’ll grab him by his trousers, then I’ll grab him by his flesh, and then he’ll tell me why they hound me” (593). As if seeking to reconstruct the constitutive scene in which Balak desired the moist substance that leaked from Yitzhak’s brush, truth and blood become one: “I won’t approach him calmly and I won’t raise my voice, but I’ll bite him and the truth will leak out of his body” (628). Yitzhak marks the dog with paint and finally the dog marks him back with blood, the latter act perhaps more explicitly violent than the former, though not if one considers the chain of events that followed the painting.

So Yitzhak is eventually bitten by the dog whose craziness resulted from his own doing, from the words he wrote on him. But what is the nature of this link between the writing and the insanity? How does the one eventuate in the other?

One possible link is that the words written in the “holy tongue” created insanity by the mystical illocutionary force invested in them. This option is discussed at length by Hasak-Lowy, who reads the entire Balak plot as Agnon’s thematization of language, specifically of Hebrew. Hasak-Lowy highlights the connection between the Balak plot, excommunication, the biblical Creation story, and the golem story, all of which rely on a conception of Hebrew as a sacred language, and all of which may be considered Searlean declarations. Searle’s “Classification of Illocutionary Acts”

seeks to correct the weaknesses of Austin's taxonomy and suggest an alternative one.<sup>106</sup> Declarations, according to Searle, are a special (somewhat privileged) type of illocutionary acts that bring about a fit between propositional content and reality by the very fact of their successful performance. They include, for example: appointing someone for a position, declaring a war, performing a marriage. Most declarations involve an extra linguistic institution (such as church, the law, the state) and a special position of the speaker and the hearer within this institution. The only exceptions to the requirement of an extra-linguistic institution are declarations that concern language itself: defining, abbreviating, dubbing, naming, or calling. A further exception, which Searle mentions in a footnote, is the supernatural declaration, and the example he offers is the Divine act of creation: "When God says 'Let there be light' that is a declaration".<sup>107</sup>

Following Searle, Hasak-Lowy distinguishes between excommunication, whose power to bring the world into compliance with words derives from an extra-linguistic practice or institution, and Yitzhak's words, which resemble the Creation as well as the golem story insofar as their power derives from a mystical, magical power inherent in language itself.<sup>108</sup>

The fact that Yitzhak ultimately creates a crazy dog turns his 'inferiority' relative to Adam on its head. If it appeared that Yitzhak, in the writing scene, was merely imitating Adam, using the name already given by him, he now emerges as the creator of a crazy dog whereas Adam merely

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<sup>106</sup> Searle's taxonomy includes: representatives (or assertives), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Austin's taxonomy of illocutionary acts consists of: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives. John R. Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts", *Language in Society*, 5, 1 (1976): 1-23; Austin, *How to Do*, 151.

<sup>107</sup> Searle, "A Classification", 14-15.

<sup>108</sup> Hasak-Lowy, "Mad Dog's Attack", 182-83.

participated in God's creation, completing it by giving animals their names. Hasak-Lowy refers to Gershom Scholem's text on the golem, in which Scholem notes that the act of creating a golem is a repetition of the creation of Adam.<sup>109</sup> In all versions of the golem legends inanimate clay is given life by the writing of the Hebrew word *emet* ('truth') on the creature. According to Hasak-Lowy, "[t]his obviously echoes the single most conspicuous aspect of Yitzhak's initial encounter with Balak".<sup>110</sup>

Scholem underscores the danger inherent in every creation: "Golem-making is dangerous; like all major creation it endangers the life of the creator [...]. Mistakes in carrying out the directions do not impair the golem; they destroy its creator".<sup>111</sup> The name that Yitzhak gives and what it subsequently creates indeed culminate in the erasure of his own name. Just before Yitzhak's death, rabbi Alter, who circumcised him in infancy, reviews the notebook in which he lists the names of all the children he has circumcised and notices that "the letters of Yitzhak's name were blurred" (637).

The notion that Yitzhak's inscription possesses a supernatural declarative force that results in "the signifier overwhelming the referent" and a mystical accordance coming to hold between name and referent is a crucial component of the understanding of *Only Yesterday*. But the insistence that this power of the declaration derives, as Hasak-Lowy argues, "not from any extra-linguistic practice or institution, as in the case of excommunications, but from a mystical, magical

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<sup>109</sup> Gershom Scholem, "The Idea of the Golem", in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1965), 158-204.

<sup>110</sup> Hasak-Lowy, "Mad Dog's Attack", 185.

<sup>111</sup> Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 190-91.

power inherent in the language itself” seems unnecessarily narrowing and exclusive.<sup>112</sup> In my own reading, Balak is a fascinating subject, in both senses of the word, precisely because he is situated at the intersection of various forces – the illocutionary and perlocutionary, the ‘mystical’ and the ‘social’. Yitzhak’s inscription, as I have argued, works as a perlocutionary utterance as well as an illocutionary one. His words do what they say *in saying so*, but nonetheless, the consequential role that later readings of the text play in rendering the dog insane cannot be dismissed. Moreover, the mystical and the social interpellation already coexist within the illocutionary option itself. Indeed, Butler’s reading of Althusser suggests that the very distinction between the mystical and the social (or at least a very similar one, between the ‘divine’ and the ‘social’) is invalid. Althusser consistently turns to the divine interpellation, especially God’s calling Moses and Peter by their names, to exemplify the mechanism of the making and becoming of a subject. As Butler shows, “the divine power of naming structures the theory of interpellation that accounts for the ideological constitution of the subject”, and interpellation “is essentially figured through the religious example”.<sup>113</sup>

The illocutionary force of the words ‘crazy dog’ cannot be confined to the mystical realm, since it emanates equally from the subjugating power of everyday language. Just as the

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<sup>112</sup> Hasak-Lowy, “Mad Dog’s Attack”, 182.

<sup>113</sup> Butler, *Psychic Life*, 110-113. One of the first examples Althusser employs from the religious sphere is indeed not straight forwardly linguistic. Discussing the dialectics of ‘ideas’ and actions, he paraphrases Pascal: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe”. This example is astonishingly similar to an anecdote from *Only Yesterday* demonstrating the interpellative force of signs that are not Hebrew or Jewish, and not even linguistic. It is the story of a Jewish family that suffers persecution and is devastated by illness before being rescued by Christian missionaries who baptize them into the Christian faith. “They said, What do we care if they sprinkle a little water over us? But the water sprinkled on the body reached the soul” (88). Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 168.

perlocutionary and illocutionary are intertwined and operate non-exclusively, so the mystical and the earthly, seen as illocutionary, are best understood together, as completing rather than competing forces.

Ultimately, seen as a performative act, do Yitzhak's words present a failure or a success? It seems that by their very infelicities – the perpetual break from context, the deviation from the initial intentions and from conventions and ritual, the misreadings and mistranslations – the words are eventually utterly successful in 'doing what they say': in saying 'crazy dog', the dog becomes crazy. "The mark interpellation makes is not descriptive, but inaugurative. It seeks to introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one", Butler writes.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, the creational states "Let there be light" or 'Let there be crazy dog', and in saying so produces light and crazy dogs. Such a substantial transformation of extra-linguistic facts is the most extreme form of the performative, and it exists, potentially at least, in naming and calling names.

The interpretative question posed by the narrator at the end of the novel – "This Yitzhak who is no worse than any other person, why is he punished so harshly? Is it because he teased a dog? He meant it only as a joke" (639) – is articulated in terms of ethics and responsibility. The novel's many critics since its publication have almost all grappled with this question, some attempting to provide answers and others debating the need or possibility of answering it.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 33.

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey*, 113-14; Arpali, *Rav-roman*, 170-71; 182; Miron, "Ha'analogia hafaustit", 593-94, "Mimashal lesipur", 603; Band "Hahete ve'onsho", 300-01.

Whether or not Yitzhak “meant it only as a joke”, the text supplies us with no reason to believe that he intended his words to do what they in fact did; but does this exempt him from responsibility? Shoshana Felman refers to the unintentional consequences of speech acts as a “scandal” that consists in the fact that “the act cannot know what it is doing”.<sup>116</sup> In Butler’s articulation, the speech act is always to some extent unknowing about what it performs, always saying things that it does not intend. However, “Untethering the speech act from the sovereign subject founds an alternative notion of agency and, ultimately, of responsibility”, proposing that “agency begins where sovereignty wanes”.<sup>117</sup>

When Yitzhak himself is finally confronted with the consequences of his action, just before being bitten by the dog, he still does not understand the profound nature of his digression. Facing Balak, “Yitzhak looked at him in amazement, and finally replied calmly, Who says he’s crazy? Said they, Isn’t that what’s written explicitly? Said Yitzhak, And if it is written, so what? Are we obligated to believe everything that’s written?” (624). Despite everything that Yitzhak’s inscription has stirred, created, and produced, he himself dismisses it as a frivolity that need not be believed. Soon, however, these words and the dog they created will come back to bite Yitzhak, proving how wrong he is in his perception of writing as frivolous and of the inscription as inconsequential. Indeed, what matters is not the veracity of his inscription (whether it ought to be believed) but simply the consequences of the ways in which it was in fact interpreted.

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<sup>116</sup> Shoshana Felman, *The literary speech act: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 96.

<sup>117</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 10; 15-16.

## Chapter 4: The Story of the Name

### Authorship and the Name of the Author in “Edo and Enam”

#### 1.

“The author’s name is not just a proper name like the rest”, Foucault writes,<sup>1</sup> and Agnon’s name is a name like no other author’s. Agnon embedded his name into many of his texts in various manners, and one of the most extreme manifestations of this literary phenomenon is the story “Edo and Enam”, published in 1950.<sup>2</sup> With this story, Agnon’s preoccupation with names reaches a kind of peak, becoming deliberately excessive, even extravagant.

Gerhard and Gerda Greifenbach, Gidon Ginat, Gabriel Gamzu, his wife Gemulah and her father Gevariah ben Ge’uel are but some of the names of characters that inhabit the story. We also encounter Edo and Enam, Amadia, Edna and Adiel Amrami, as well as languages, places, and more characters whose names all begin with the Hebrew letters *gimel* and *ayin*, which are, as virtually all critics have noticed, the first two letters of Agnon’s name.<sup>3</sup> The accentuated, some say grotesque

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, “What is an Author”, 146.

<sup>2</sup> S.Y. Agnon, “Edo ve’Enam”, in *Ad hena* [Thus Far] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 269-309. All quotes are from the English translation. *Two Tales by S.Y. Agnon; Betrothed and Edo and Enam*, trans. Walter Lever (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 141-233.

<sup>3</sup> The transcription into English does not fully reflect this pattern since the single Hebrew consonant *ayin* is represented by different English vowels, depending on its punctuation. An identical naming system appears in another story by Agnon, “Ad olam” [Forever].

use of names that follow a distinct pattern is just one of several features that have puzzled readers of the story, constituting it, like *Only Yesterday* and even more eccentrically, as a riddle that requires deciphering and decoding. Perhaps more than any other work by Agnon, “Edo and Enam” was considered a text for intellectuals and scholars, which lay readers would not be able fully to appreciate.<sup>4</sup>

The story takes place in Jerusalem of the mid-twentieth century, or perhaps about a decade earlier,<sup>5</sup> and its protagonists are modern Jewish scholars and intellectuals. However, it also involves fantastic elements that originate in a distant mythical region inhabited by legendary characters that possess extraordinary powers. A concise summary of the plot is a near impossibility: like a detective story, the text is characterized by a ubiquity of details that all seem indispensable to its understanding. Moreover, any such summary would inevitably include information that departs in some way from letter of the text and is interpretative or speculative, again as with a detective story, in which hypotheses are raised, ruled out, replaced by others, and so on.

The narrator, telling the story in the first person, arrives at the house of his friends Gerhard and Gerda Greifenbach, who are planning a trip abroad. He agrees to watch the house while they are away, not only as a favor to his friends but also because of his infatuation with and curiosity

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<sup>4</sup> Zahi Weiss described the text as “one of the most researched Hebrew stories written in the twentieth century”. Zahi Weiss, *Mot hashekhinah beytzirat Agnon* [The Death of *Shekhinah* in Agnon’s Fiction] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Zemah initially contended that the story takes place in 1948, until Yitzhak Rahamim showed, in a short text devoted to this question, that it occurs between 1929 and 1939, a correction which Zemah accepted. Zemah’s article “On the Historiosophic Conception in Two of Agnon’s Stories” (“Edo and Enam” and “Forever”) was initially published in *Hasifrut* (1968), and a slightly revised version was later incorporated into his book *Kri’ah tamah*, including his acknowledgement of Rahamim’s revision. Yitzhak Rahamim, “He’ara al mo’ed hitrahashuto shel hasipur ‘Edo ve’Enam” [A Comment on the Time of Occurrence of ‘Edo and Enam’], *Hasifrut* 32 (1983): 158-59.



concerning their tenant, Dr. Ginat, an admired philologist who has published three acclaimed books, two on the ancient language Edo and a volume of the beautiful Enamite hymns.<sup>6</sup> Ginat is an ascetic recluse rarely spotted even by his landlords since the day they rented him a room in their house.

Most of the story takes place during two consecutive nights which the narrator spends at the Greifenbachs' house. On both nights, he receives puzzling visits from his friend, Gabriel Gamzu, a dealer of ancient Hebrew manuscripts who once traveled the world in search of old texts and is now confined to his house because of his moonstricken wife, Gemulah. On both occasions, Gamzu appears uninvited and unannounced at the Greifenbachs' house and proceeds to tell the narrator of his expeditions, especially the one during which he met Gemulah, the daughter of Gevariah ben Ge'uel, the mighty leader of an archaic Jewish tribe named Gad.<sup>7</sup> Gamzu fell in love with the beautiful Gemulah, who sang fabulous songs in a strange language and conversed with her father in another idiosyncratic language they apparently had made up for themselves. He also tells the narrator of the bundle of magical leaves given him by Gemulah's father, Gevarya ben Ge'uel, to help him control her sleepwalking, but which he later sold by mistake along with the book in which they were hidden.

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<sup>6</sup> Several scholars point out a possible connection between the language of Edo and the ancient language Ugaritic. See Haim Brandwein, "Al mashma umivne beyetzirat Agnon" [On Meaning and Structure in Agnon's fiction], part 2, *Ha'arets*, April 27, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Gevariah ben Ge'uel is described by Gamzu as "a mighty man. His face was the face of a lion, his strength was that of a bull, and he was light-footed as an eagle in flight. [...] He also healed the sick, wrote charms, and taught betrothed maidens the marriage dances and songs" (175). Similar descriptions of Gemulah, all delivered by Gamzu, contribute to the perception of Gad as a mythical tribe that exists in a supernatural, timeless sphere.

One other character besides Gamzu and Gemulah links the two worlds between which the story oscillates – a sage from Jerusalem named Gideon<sup>8</sup> who once visited Gemulah’s community and left a great impression on its people, and on her especially. “Sage Gideon” is suspected by Gamzu to be the man who later purchased the book containing the leaves, and both the narrator and Gamzu suspect that he might in fact be Ginat, the reclusive scholar, who appeared in disguise both at his visit to the Gad tribe and at Gamzu’s book sale. This suspicion is corroborated by the fact, known to the narrator but not to Gamzu, that Ginat gave the Greifenbachs two leaves from a bundle of leaves in his possession whose description is quite similar to the extraordinary depiction of the leaves given to Gamzu.

The nocturnal, mysterious atmosphere of the meetings between the narrator and Gamzu is enhanced by their growing awareness of all manner of strange noises coming from nearby. At the climactic end of the second night, Gamzu bursts into Ginat’s room and finds him there with Gemulah, writing down her words spoken in the language she used with her father. Gamzu grabs his wife, who declares her love for Ginat but is told by the scholar that she must go with her husband. The story ends thirty days later, at the funerals of Gemulah and Ginat, who have both fallen to their deaths from a roof.

“Edo and Enam” was perceived by most of its critics as a text that deals with Jewish themes: the history of Israel; religious and scholarly Jewish texts; the Hebrew language. Tuchner’s influential

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<sup>8</sup> The appellative as it appears in the story is “*Haham Gideon*” – Sage Gideon – hence ‘sage’ is not only an adjective but part of his name.

reading bestows on each character and place an unequivocal interpretation: Gemulah is the *Shekhinah*, and Gamzu – the people of Israel. Their first meeting is the biblical episode of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, represented by the city of Amadia. Ginat is the calculated man of science, who “lacks any emotional relation to the sanctity of the research object”. Gevaria Ben Ge’uel (Gemulah’s father) is at once Moses and Rabbi Akiva. The mysterious song that Gemulah sings when Gamzu first meets her and later in Ginat’s room – “yiddal, yiddal, yiddal, vah, pah, mah” – alludes to the initials of *Song of Songs* 4:16: “*Yavo dodi legano, veyokhal peri migdayo*”.<sup>9</sup>

Although the majority of critics adopted Tuchner’s Jewish-historical thematic frame of reference,<sup>10</sup> his reading was nonetheless continuously and thoroughly reviewed and criticized. Zemah, whose reading also became an interpretative milestone, offers a different interpretation of the Gamzu-Ginat opposition. To him, Gamzu and Ginat do not represent religious belief versus science but two contrasting historiosophic attitudes toward the history of Israel. They are both scholars, but whereas Gamzu represents the traditional, orthodox historiosophy, Ginat stands for an approach that estranges itself from Jewish religion and relates the people of Israel to an ancient non-monotheistic culture that once existed in Palestine.<sup>11</sup>

Others challenged Tuchner on a more fundamental level, transforming the debate over the story’s meaning into a meta-theoretical dispute over what constitutes a legitimate, sustainable

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<sup>9</sup> Tuchner, *Pesher Agnon*, 106-22. The verse from *Song of Songs* reads: “Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits”.

<sup>10</sup> As Arbel indicates, while “Edo and Enam” received wide scholarly and critical consideration, including various comprehensive interpretations, these interpretations all repeat “one basic move: an allegorical reading which leads to a theme of historical transition”. Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Zemah, *Kri’ah tamah*, 40-61.

interpretation. Tuchner's hermetic allegorical reading, it was often noted, treated the text as a puzzle whose code, once deciphered, would expose its true, definite meaning.<sup>12</sup> Miron maintains that "Edo and Enam" is not a riddle waiting to be solved, certainly not by imposing on it a unilateral, exclusive meaning. Instead he portrays the text as one of Agnon's stories whose "darkness is their very nature and a condition of their integral artistic existence".<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Shaked argues that "Edo and Enam", like all truly great works of art, cannot be interpreted unequivocally: "We can revolve around the secret of this story and approach it from different angles, but we cannot extract all of its treasures".<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, Tuchner distinguishes between the "current-realistic reality levels" and the "historical-legendary reality levels", asserting that "the meaning of the story transcends a plot-story about a mere realistic-psychological motif" and that "there is no doubt" that this meaning is "imbedded in an entirely different realm".<sup>15</sup> Thus, some parts of the text demand close scrutiny, according to Tuchner, while others merit hardly any. This distinction, which he articulates rather

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<sup>12</sup> He was by no means the only critic to do so. Shlomo Zuker depicts the story as a "crossroad-puzzle". Barzel contends that "once the key to the author's intention is found, the riddle no longer exists. The work appears in full clarity, without the barrier of any secret. [...] The author wrote a parable, whose meaning, in all its details, is completely clear to him". Shlomo Zuker, "Be'ayat haperush shel 'Edo ve'Enam' ve'Ad Olam' leS.Y. Agnon" [The Problem of the Interpretation of S.Y. Agnon's 'Edo and Enam' and 'Forever'], *Hasifrut* 2 (1969-71): 416; Hillel Barzel, *Bein Agnon leKafka; mehkar mashve* [Between Agnon and Kafka: A Comparative Study] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1972), 201.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Miron, "Tzi'un derekh vetamrur azhara bevikoret Agnon" [A Milestone and a Warning Signal in Agnon Criticism], *Mozna'im* 27 (1968): 353. Miron's essay was offered as a critical review of Tuchner's reading and not an independent interpretation.

<sup>14</sup> Gershon Shaked, "'Edo ve'Enam' – hipus ahar interpretatzia" ["Edo and Enam" – A Search for Interpretation]. Shaked's text appeared originally in German. It was translated and incorporated into Weiss's pedagogical volume reviewing the critical history of "Edo and Enam". Hillel Weiss, *Agnon – "Agunot", "Edo ve'Enam"; mekorot mivnim mashma'ut* [Agnon, "Agunot", "Edo and Enam"; Sources, Structures, Meaning] (Tel Aviv: The Open University Press, 1979), vol. 2, section 2, 267.

<sup>15</sup> Tuchner, *Pesher Agnon*, 107-110.

explicitly, became an underlying assumption of many other readings, which took it more or less for granted that the 'legendary', 'mythical', 'mysterious' aspects of the story deserved more interpretational attention than the 'realistic', 'psychological' ones. The contemporary plot about the husband, wife, and supposed lover was presented in the majority of these readings as an obvious "outer façade" or narratological frame concealing behind it another story, the true story. But as Amihud Gilad notes, this prevalent distinction (the critical trend itself identified by Gilad) between the story's obscure segments and elements and its explicit ones (also referred to as its external and internal, or exposed and hidden, parts) is no more tenable here than it is in any literary work: "In a literary text, even the 'self evident' parts require interpretation," and indeed, "there is nothing that is 'self evident' in literature".<sup>16</sup>

In her an ars-poetical reading (which my own interpretation echoes in several respects), Arbel underscores the central role of artistic creation in "Edo and Enam". She argues that the distinction, or rather lack thereof, between reality and imagination, between an archaic origin and fiction, and between the authentic and the fake recurs in the text and is essential to its understanding. At the story's core, she contends, lies the romantic conception that fabrication, the act of forgery, is not only a necessary part of any work of art but the very element that constitutes whatever 'truth' that the artistic creation carries. And while "Edo and Enam" does not offer an overt representation of the poetic, the presence of the act of creation and of the blurring of the line between truth and imagination, reality and representation, is not only felt but in fact dominates the

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<sup>16</sup> Amihud Gilad, "He'arot al interpretatzia sifrutit" [Comments on Literary Interpretation] *Hasifrut* 3 (1971-72): 490, 495. Gilad notes that this distinction is related to Dov Sadan's famous concept of Agnon's "double-layered" stories.

story.<sup>17</sup> Several other critics have offered corresponding readings, focusing on creation and the tension between fiction and reality;<sup>18</sup> some have also pointed to linguistic issues that emerge from the text, such as the question of conventional versus natural language.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps more than any other work by Agnon, “Edo and Enam” encouraged an abundance of *midrahsei shem* – an almost manic discourse of name interpretation that explained the source, reference, and meaning/s of each and every name in the story. Still, though the rigid structural pattern that dictates one of two invariable letters at the head of every character name was addressed extensively, it has not been exhausted. The pattern was conceived as a form of signature embedded in the text by Agnon. But why here? Why this text specifically? This question remains largely unanswered.

My reading begins with a discussion of Agnon, the author who embeds his name into his literary works, focusing on “Edo and Enam” and on the function of this rigid linguistic pattern within the text. It continues with an interpretation of the story that revolves around questions of narration and authorship and shines a spotlight on the acts of telling a story and of listening to one – whether

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<sup>17</sup> Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 108-11. Arbel’s book deals primarily with those Agnon work in which the poetic is indeed explicitly represented.

<sup>18</sup> See Esther Fuchs, *Omanut hahitamemut: Al ha’ironia shel S.Y. Agnon* [The Art of Dissimulation; On S.Y. Agnon’s Irony] (Tel Aviv: Katz Institute and Tel Aviv University, 1985), 152-53; Israel Ashahel, “Hatshuka al pi ‘Edo ve’Enam” [Desire According to “Edo and Enam”], *Keshet Hahadasha* 14 (2005): 10-11.

<sup>19</sup> Zahi Weiss, *Mot hashekhinah*, 120-23; Shaked “Hipus ahar interpretatzia”, 264.

it is to the story itself as told directly or to the story as it 'tells itself' through various sounds and auditory data. Who is in fact telling this story, who controls and steers it? Where is the line drawn between hearing a story, understanding or interpreting it, and telling it? And in what way does the spoken story relate to the written one? Thus, while I do not seek (nor think it possible or necessary) to decipher the text based on the name pattern that governs the work, I wish to sketch a possible connection between the author's persistent signature, and questions regarding authorship and ownership of texts, both written and verbal, which are so fundamental to this text and have not yet received sufficient critical attention.

My reading, which foregrounds those parts of the story typically perceived as its mere façade, and in particular those parts within this 'realistic plot' that have seemed almost transparent to many critics, is meant as a completing rather than competing interpretation. Thus, I hardly touch on the Jewish-historical perspective, which seems to have been exhausted. On several other issues, however, including Gamzu's character and especially the portrayal of the narrator, I break with the view of the majority of the story's critics. The issue of allegory – that is, whether "Edo and Enam" should be read as allegory, and if so, how – gradually gained prominence in the meta-critical discourse on the story. In what follows, I embrace Paul de Man's proposition that "any narrative is primarily the allegory of its own reading", and that allegorical narratives, moreover, "tell the story of the failure to read".<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Paul De-Man, *Allegories of Reading; Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 76, 205.

## 2.

Over the years, Agnon embedded his name, or rather names, into many of his texts, but initially it was rather the text that was embedded into his name. The name Agnon is borrowed from the title of what is considered his first work, “*Agunot*”, with which he first took this name.<sup>21</sup> “By deriving his writerly name from the title of his first work,” Golomb-Hoffman notes, “Agnon announces, in effect, the birth of the writer through the text whose author he is”.<sup>22</sup> Shaked contends that Agnon’s decision to use the title of his own story as his *nom de plume* and his surname is a symbolic act that has no parallel in Hebrew literature: “What we have here is an extension of the fictional into the real, the fictional narrative becoming a kind of a *perush* (interpretation) on the existential and poetic experience of the author, an interpretation which has forced him to displace the chief element in his identifying sign”.<sup>23</sup>

In early years, Agnon regarded the name only as a literary pseudonym and did not like to be called by it. Scholem writes of the time the two resided in Berlin:

He was very strict concerning the utter distinction between the author and the man, and a sign of this is that when I addressed him by the name Agnon he protested at once. ‘My name is Tchatchkes’ – he would correct me. And when I asked him why he didn’t want to be called Agnon, he would answer that while Agnon is a pretty name

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<sup>21</sup> “*Agunot*” was Agnon’s first published story after arriving in Palestine, in 1908. It is noteworthy that Agnon’s son, Hemdat, was named after a fictional character who is the protagonist of Agnon’s early story “Hill of Sand” and reappears in later works, including *Only Yesterday*.

<sup>22</sup> Golomb-Hoffman, *Between Exile*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> Shaked, “Midrash and Narrative”, 287.



from a literary aspect, what use is there in it, if it is does not appear in the holy books.<sup>24</sup>

But upon his return to Palestine from Germany in 1924 he agreed “to be called Agnon for every purpose”.<sup>25</sup> Elahanan Shiloh points out that, at this stage, Agnon began to appreciate his new name precisely because it appears nowhere in the holy books of Kabbalah: “From the day the world was created and until I came along, the holy letters did not come together to form any name like mine”.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the name that was borrowed from the text was then inserted back into it. Agnon made his name part of the literary work in several manners, one of which was the use of acronyms and anagrams. "Dr Rishel" from the story “Friendship” is the acronym of Rabbi Shmuel Yosef HaLevi, and "Shrit" from “The Last Bus” is an anagram of Rashit: Rabbi Yosef Shmuel Tchatchkes.<sup>27</sup> In other texts, one or more of Agnon’s names appears undisguised. Yaniv Hagbi finds an overt connection between the author’s name, the Tetragram, and the act of storytelling in “In the Heart of the Seas” (*“Bilvav yamim”*), in which a character called “Rabbi Shmuel Yosef, the son of Rabbi Shalom Mordekhai ha’Levi” (the name of Agnon’s father) is a storyteller, and of such talent that “people

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<sup>24</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Devarim bego: Pirkei morahsa utehiya* [Explications and Implications; Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), 467.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Agnon, *Pithei devarim* [Openings] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2001),105; Elhanan Shiloh, *Hakabbalah beyetzirat S.Y. Agnon* [Kabbalah in the Work of S.Y. Agnon] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2011), 80.

<sup>27</sup> Yaakov Bahat, *S.Y Agnon and H. Hazaz, Iyunei mikra* (Haifa: Yovel, 1962), 150-52.

could see, as it were, the name of the living God engraved on the tip of his tongue". In "To This Day" (*Ad hena*"), the narrator's longtime friend is called Yosef Shmuel.<sup>28</sup>

In the novel *A Guest for the Night* (1939), the narrator is an author who shares many biographical features with Agnon, including his name: S.Y., formerly Tchatchkes. Considered one of Agnon's major novels, *A Guest for the Night* is also generally viewed as marking a shift in Agnon's poetics, following which his works are often narrated in the first person, by a character who participates in the story, and whose portrayal suggests his affinity to Agnon himself. In this novel, for instance, the narrator tells in the first person of his visit to his hometown Shibush, whereas Agnon himself visited Buczacz for a week in 1930 (the visit depicted in the novel is considerably longer).

The narrator-author in *A Guest for the Night* describes the inception of his artistic creation: "When I knew how to write all the letters, I wrote verses from the Psalms starting with the letters of my name such as: 'Sing the lord, bless his name [...]'.<sup>29</sup> When my hand became stronger, I wrote verses that I made up myself. When my hand grew more powerful, I wrote songs and poems".<sup>30</sup> Golomb-Hoffman shows that this is the sole point in the novel where the reader is able to piece together the given name of the protagonist, Shmuel. Inviting the reader to engage in detective work

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<sup>28</sup> Yaniv Hagbi, *Language, Absence Play: Judaism and Superstructuralism in the Poetics of S.Y. Agnon* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 156-57. My review of Agnon's names in his texts is assisted by Hagbi's discussion of the subject, titled "The Name of the Author".

<sup>29</sup> The verses quoted in the paragraph begin with the letters *shin*, *mem*, *vav*, *aleph* and *lamed*, together forming the name Shmuel.

<sup>30</sup> S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (London: Victor Gollancz, 1968), 398.

that results in the extraction of the name from the Torah passages, the novel highlights the reader's role in the production of the text.<sup>31</sup> Hagbi, referencing the same passage, notes that the name Shmuel represents more than childish play and more even than the author's name; it is "the beginning of writing, the beginning of the book".<sup>32</sup>

*A Guest for the Night* is conceived by most critics as an autobiographical novel par-excellence.<sup>33</sup> Shaked, however, in an essay titled "The Narrator as Author", describes it as quasi-autobiographical, and discusses the complex implications of the overt affinity between its "author" and its "narrator". No other Agnon work, Shaked maintains, manifests so many obvious resemblances between the life of the author and the character of the narrator, the primary intention of which is to create vagueness concerning the nature of the relation between the "fictive self" and the "actual self", to blur the line between fiction and reality.<sup>34</sup> Cohen objects to this conclusion, pointing out that the author who is the narrator is explicitly not the author who writes the novel. Fiction is indeed broken, as Shaked contends, but according to Cohen the break occurs within the fictive relation between the voice of the text, the voice of the narrator, and the biographical author, resulting in an unbridgeable gap between the narrator as author and the author as writer.<sup>35</sup> Following Serge Doubrovsky's formulation, Hagbi defines many of Agnon's

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<sup>31</sup> Golomb-Hoffman, *Between Exile*, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Hagbi, *Language, Absence*, 149.

<sup>33</sup> See Cohen, *Hisardut*, 65-70.

<sup>34</sup> Shaked, *Omanut hasipur*, 264-78.

<sup>35</sup> Cohen, *Hisardut*, 76.

works, including *A Guest for the Night*, as autofiction, with Agnon becoming a central character in his literary creations and erasing the distinction between fiction and reality.<sup>36</sup>

In “Edo and Enam” an entirely different apparatus is at work insofar as the name of the author is concerned. Other than the narrator, who speaks in the first person and whose name is never mentioned, and a few historical figures,<sup>37</sup> the names of all the story's characters follow the pattern, mentioned above, of beginning with one of the first letters in the author's name. The widespread critical reading of this structural mechanism as a form of signature inserted by Agnon into his text finds reinforcement in the fact that signatures, and the signed or unsigned status of texts, is something of a theme within the story itself. So, for instance, with respect to the rare book of religious hymns given to Gamzu, it is noted that some of the hymns in the book were written by Rabbi Dosa, who “in his great humility did not sign his name to it, except in the fourth line, where he [...] introduces his name in an acrostic” (198).

In a short piece published posthumously (and apparently not intended for publication),<sup>38</sup> Agnon humorously added the narrator of “Edo and Enam” and Gamzu to a circle of interpreters commenting on the story. The piece opens with the narrator reporting that many readers have been asking him to tell them more about Ginat, Gamzu, and Gemulah. It evolves into a discussion of

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<sup>36</sup> Hagbi, *Language, Absence*, 151-52.

<sup>37</sup> As mentioned in the first chapter, in the novella “And The Crooked Shall Be Made Straight” historical figures are similarly excepted from the general pattern of naming, as if the rules of fiction did not apply to the representation of real human beings.

<sup>38</sup> The text was attached to Haim Brandwein's critique of the story, which appeared in *Ha'aretz*, April 20, 1979.

the value of the Gamzu stories, especially his penchant for digression,<sup>39</sup> and ends with the question of names, as the narrator addresses his readers/audience:

After these things I add a sort of a question, [as well as] an answer. Maybe you have also noticed that all the names of people in the story and the names of places in the story begin with the same letter, and even the exceptions are equal in their own way since all of them match at their beginning with the same letter. This thing I asked Mr Gamzu, and told him, How is it rabbi Gavriel that all the creatures of heaven and of earth begin with *ayin* or *gimel*, And what did he answer, Should I forfeit the geography, should I change the names of men and women? If you find Amnon and Tamar pretty, if you find Kissalon and Mandmena, which those books are filled with, pretty, please, find pleasure in them.

In this fascinating modernistic moment, Gabriel Gamzu, a fictive character whose family name and given name both begin with *gimel*, is asked to explain the formal pattern of names that governs the story in which he is written. Gamzu's reply is made up of two parts, representing two exclusive points of view. First, he speaks as a character in the story for whom the names of places and people are a given fact, a natural reality that seems neither strange nor, in any case, alterable. Then, he addresses the text as such, i.e. as an object of reading, sending any displeased readers to find pleasure in other texts.<sup>40</sup> No less intriguing is the narrator's question itself, which implies that he neither takes credit for nor understands the systematic naming in the story he once told. Though acknowledging the story as such, he appears to be subjected to it no less than any other fictive character.

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<sup>39</sup> Arbel and Weiss point out that Gamzu, as he appears in this text, or rather, given how his stories are depicted, seems to be a reflection of Agnon himself. Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 129; Weiss, *Mekorot, mivnim*, section 1, 54.

<sup>40</sup> Kissalon and Madmena are the typical names of fictive towns in the writings of Shalom Yaakov Abramovich, borrowed from Joshua 15:10,31. The biblical names Amnon and Tamar are perhaps mentioned since they also indicate a linguistic pattern, as the one begins with the first letter in Hebrew alphabet and the other with the last. It is also possible that the reference is to another text of the *Hakalah*, Avraham Mapu's *Ahavat Zion*, which is considered the first Hebrew novel, and whose protagonists are the biblical Amnon and Tamar.

Returning to the actual critics of “Edo and Enam”, it seems that the unparalleled preoccupation with *midrashei shem* – name interpretation – stirred by this story sometimes came at the expense of an attempt to explain the phenomenon in principle. Gemulah’s name in particular received diverse explanations, based on various Hebrew sources in which the root G.M.L appears: a child weaned from her mother’s milk; a woman temporarily separated from her husband or even *agunah*; a mature woman; man’s affinity to God; Gemulah as an anagram of *hagolem* (the golem).<sup>41</sup>

Kurzweil, who dismisses Agnon’s “self amusement with all kinds of riddles that occasionally are not an artistic necessity” in the story, practically rebukes him for the systematical naming: “I do not appreciate the fact, for example, that the names of all the people in the story begin with the letter *gimel*, although the author’s intension is clear to me. Had this magic connection between the characters not existed, it would not have harmed the story”.<sup>42</sup> But other critics took the device more seriously. Shaked finds deep significance in the play on letters, which to him implies that the characters do not stand in their own right: “Like dreams – they are projections of the ‘I’”.<sup>43</sup> Arbel argues that the character names insert the artist into the realm of the fictional world, and Hagbi

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<sup>41</sup> It is of course virtually impossible to explicate these name interpretations in any language other than Hebrew due to the ‘untranslatability’ of the name. See Barzel, *Bein Agnon leKafka*, 190; Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 118; Weiss, *Mekorot, mivnim*, section 1, 31-33; Hagbi, *Language, Absence*, 56.

<sup>42</sup> Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurei*, 141-42.

<sup>43</sup> Shaked, “Hipus ahar”, 262.

similarly contends that the fact that the characters bear the same initials as their 'real' creator emphasizes the close likeness between narrator and author.<sup>44</sup>

In my eyes the exact opposite is true. Far from blurring the distinction between fiction and reality, the rigid naming pattern constantly emphasizes the fictiveness and artificiality of the narrated world.<sup>45</sup> The rigid formal rule that determines such a limited phonetic range for the names of the characters, resulting in distinct alliteration, exposes the text as such – a contrived artifact produced by an author whose control over the text is total. In a certain section of the story this artificiality is carried one step further, the onomastic regulation spreading to 'contaminate' the majority of nouns and verbs, which suddenly also begin with *gimel*.<sup>46</sup> A world in which all names, and occasionally other entities, start with one of only two letters of the alphabet seems unreasonable and implausible, or in other words, fictitious, and the story, rather than a representation of actual events, emphatically appears as a poetical, linguistic structure.

A similar perspective was suggested by Barzel, who contends that Agnon distributed his name between all the characters as a way of indicating that he is master of all actions that flow from his imagination.<sup>47</sup> In her book about Agnon's irony, Fuchs offers an even more extreme reading when she discusses what she calls the "onomastic grotesque" in "Edo and Enam", which

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<sup>44</sup> Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 118. Hagbi, *Language, Absence*, 91.

<sup>45</sup> This view tracks Cohen's disagreement with Shaked's reading of *A Guest for the Night*, discussed above.

<sup>46</sup> Agnon, "Edo ve'Enam", 288.

<sup>47</sup> Barzel, *Bein Agnon leKafka*, 198-99. Barzel explains even the few names that do not begin with *ayin* and *gimel* as participating in Agnon's 'signature': some names, such as Nevukhadnetzer and Vienna, assist in building up the name Agnon, while others, such as rabbi Shmuel or rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, indicate other parts of Agnon's name (Shmuel and HaLevi).

refers to the function of the unintelligible and the arbitrary within this story. To Fuchs, the pattern of the letters at the head of the characters' names is completely arbitrary and therefore grotesque. "The artificial and arbitrary constraint of the identical letters emphasizes the fictiveness of the characters, whose identity is dependent upon invented constructions that are made up of letters and syllables, and whose essence is linguistic and not ontological".<sup>48</sup> Fuchs takes the arbitrariness thesis to an extreme when she rejects even the correlation between the two letters and Agnon's name, contending that the attempt to explain the unusual naming system through Agnon's name fails to explain anything, since it does not clarify the function of the system within this particular work. Though this last conclusion seems clearly overstated, there is good reason to heed a more logically tenable formulation of the same argument, namely, that unless the function of the naming system is clarified in relation to Agnon's name in this particular work, then indeed, it does not explain much. In the next section, I attempt to sketch the contours of one possible relation between Agnon's signature and "Edo and Enam".

But first, the issue of arbitrariness deserves further inspection. Arbitrariness and motivation are key semiotic concepts in the understanding and classification of signs. For Saussure, arbitrariness is not just one more attribute of the sign but its principal attribute. Signs in which a relation of motivation exists between signifier and signified are designated by him as symbols, and considered a sort of deformation.<sup>49</sup> The distinction between arbitrariness and motivation, and a series of related sets of terms, such as natural-conventional and proper-transposed, are examined

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<sup>48</sup> Fuchs, *Omanut hahitamemut*, 153.

<sup>49</sup> Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 67-69.



by Tzvetan Todorov in order to review the history of the symbol and the fundamental opposition in romantic aesthetics between symbol and allegory. In converse relation to the hierarchy determined by Saussure, romanticism casts the symbol – which is the motivated, natural, transposed sign – as the positive and superior term of the two.<sup>50</sup> Derrida’s analysis of Saussure’s conception regarding arbitrary signs and motivated symbols, facilitated by Peirce’s semiology, results in the assertion that “there is neither symbol nor sign, but a becoming-sign of the symbol”.<sup>51</sup>

When Fuchs writes of the “arbitrary pattern of letters that recur at the beginning of the names in the story”, it seems that she misplaces arbitrariness, since it is not the pattern itself that is arbitrary – quite the contrary in fact – but the relation it dictates between signifier and signified.<sup>52</sup> Among themselves, as a system, the names in the story are nothing but arbitrary, they present a most radical form of linguistic motivation. But this motivation is precisely that which considerably limits the possibility for the symbolic motivation that links the signifier and the signified, the names and the characters that bear them. It is almost an axiom of literary reading, surely among Agnon readers, to ascribe a symbolic justification or motivation to the relation between character and name. In other words, in literature (and not only within it), names are rarely perceived as arbitrary

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<sup>50</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982). In Todorov’s analysis, the symbol is contrasted with the sign (the wider category to which it belongs) and with allegory (an opposite category) at the same time. Consequently, it sometimes seems that allegory and sign are parallel terms, and indeed Todorov draws a straight line between them when he indicates that Saussure’s ‘sign’ is what Goethe calls ‘allegory’.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 47. As Derrida points out, the terminology of sign and symbol is rather confusing when discussing both Saussure and Peirce, since Peirce’s ‘symbol’ is parallel to Saussure’s ‘sign’, while the latter’s ‘symbol’ is coined by Peirce as ‘icon’.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida opens his discussion of Saussure’s concept of arbitrariness with the observation that only the relationships between a particular signifier and its particular signified is regulated by arbitrariness. *Ibid*, 44.

signs but rather, by default, as highly motivated ones. In *A Simple Story*, as I have shown, Agnon highlights the motivation that relates name to referent, transposing the act of naming into the fictive world, where the characters themselves mediate on the accordance between name and bearer and apply to the naming of newborn children such conventional considerations as passing on the name of a deceased relative. Thus the motivation is presented as a realistic mechanism, and not a merely 'literary' or 'symbolic' device manipulated by the author. In "Edo and Enam" something entirely different occurs. Not only does naming not take place within the story, it emphatically contests realistic probability. The names are not arbitrary at all but the motivation that determines them does not reside in the relation between signifier and signified.<sup>53</sup> Instead, the names are subjected to a linguistic system whose governing rule is morphological, thus it is the attachment of the signifiers to one another, their similarities and differences, that constitute their primary determining principle. As the names obey firstly the motivation of linguistic pattern, participating in "an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier",<sup>54</sup> an element of arbitrariness unavoidably penetrates the relation between signifier and signified.

Instead of a 'transcendental signified' that determines the entire system, here we find a system of signifiers that are all motivated to what might be called a 'transcendental signifier' –

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<sup>53</sup> In Saussure's study of anagrams, revealed only posthumously in notebooks and sketches found among his belongings, he acknowledges the unusual relationship that holds between signifier and signified in the case of anagrams, where the hermetic link between signifier and signified, so fundamental to his semiotics, is loosened or neutralized, at least temporarily. Peter Wunderli, "Saussure's Anagrams and the Analysis of Literary Texts", in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, ed. Carol Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 174, 180.

<sup>54</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author", 142.

Agnon's own name, the name of the creator-author. This unique 'signature' procedure employed by Agnon in "Edo and Enam", a signature that becomes the text itself, corresponds, surely uncoincidentally, with the Kabbalistic conception of the Torah as composed of the name of God, which forms not only the basis of all language but the origin of all creation. Scholem's text on "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala" offers an extensive review of the principles and evolution of this linguistic-creative perception of the name God, which is first and foremost the Tetragram, and also purely mystical divine names composed of 12, 42, and 72 letters, as well as other appellatives.<sup>55</sup> *Sefer yetzira*, considered the first text of Jewish mysticism and traditionally ascribed to Abraham, outlines the procedures by which God associated the letters of his four-letter name with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, permutating and combining them according to certain laws to form the other divine names and appellatives, thereby forming the essence of everything created and yet to be created. Scholem indicates that even among the first Kabbalists the Torah is already seen as a series of divine names, and moreover, as a whole – the Torah constitutes the one and only great name of God: "The five books of the Torah are the name of the Sacred Being".<sup>56</sup>

As for God's relation to his own name, Scholem presents two contradicting points of view.

According to the first, God as he exists beyond the perspective of the creation has a name known

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<sup>55</sup> Scholem stresses that it is the Tetragram that "brought about the creation, or rather the creation is closely affixed to the Name – i.e., the creation is contained within its limits by the name". Scholem, "Name of God", 69.

<sup>56</sup> Scholem quotes Ezra Ben Salomon. Ibid, 78. Moshe Idel notes that a repeated pronunciation of the names of God is one of the well-known techniques for achieving para-normal states of consciousness, used by Christian, Muslim, Indian, and Japanese mystics. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: Hebetim hadashim* [Kabbalah: New Perspective] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1993), 113.

only to himself, which expresses his self-awareness. In the majority of Kabbalistic sources, however, including the Zohar, the *deus absconditus* is nameless, and all his names are but condensations of the energy that radiates forth from him. While the Tetragram was typically conceived as “the root of all other names”, some Kabbalists, such as Abraham Abulafia, saw the four Hebrew letters *aleph, he, vav, yod* as the true and original name of God.<sup>57</sup> According to this perception, God’s name has never been explicitly indicated since he desired to conceal his name in order to test the hearts and intellectual capacity of his initiates. For Abulafia, creation is “an act of divine writing, in which God’s language penetrates things, and leaves them behind as his signatures in them”.<sup>58</sup>

A common denominator of the various notions briefly reviewed here, beyond the seminal position they accord the name of God, which is embedded in the Torah and in the world itself, is the perception of divine creation as an act of writing, and not as speech, as it appears in the version of creation that opens Genesis. In “Edo and Enam”, a constant conflation of written and spoken texts takes place, and this conflation is often intertwined with the question of ownership and authorship of texts.

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<sup>57</sup> These letters are the only four Hebrew consonants also used as vowels. According to Abulafia, they represent the overlap of God’s names, Jahwe and Ehjeh. Each of the two names contains only three of these letters, as the letter *he* is repeated twice in both of them. Only the combination of the two includes all four consonants. Ibid, 172-74.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 185.

### 3.

“Who is speaking thus?”; “What does it matter who is speaking?”: Two of the most seminal texts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on authorship – Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” and Foucault’s “What is an author”, both explicitly devoted to written works, open with a question about the identity of the *speaker* – not who is writing but who is speaking. The multifaceted question of who is speaking is central to “Edo and Enam” in more than one way. It concerns the intricate, elusive figure of the narrator – who is he, where is he situated in relation to the author – but sometimes it is simply a literal question of who is speaking, who does the voice belong to. Indeed, the fundamental situation of the story can be said to revolve around the question of who is telling it.

Speaking in the first person, the story’s narrator remains nameless. Despite the extreme naming standard that the story sets, more extreme still than the naming practices of *A Simple Story*, and in distinct opposition to all the characters who, in a sense, bear Agnon’s name, the “I” of the story does not have a name, or at least this name is never revealed. Nevertheless, the narrator has often been identified by critics with Agnon,<sup>59</sup> though there are hardly any biographical attributes, of the sort that appear in *A Guest for the Night*, to justify such an identification. Indeed, the narrator’s biographical characterization is generally sparing. He lives in Jerusalem in the same years Agnon resided there, surrounded by a milieu similar to Agnon’s, and has a family (“my wife and children”) that is away while the story takes place. In other words, the text offers no distinct evidence for the identification of the narrator as a literary reflection of the biographical author, just as it offers no

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<sup>59</sup> Tuchner, for example, refers to the narrator as “the author” (*hamehaber*). I return to this below.

refutation of this assumption. However, as the teller of the story, as narrator, he is very much distinguishable; and yet this characterization of him, qua narrator, has received insufficient critical attention to say the least.

Above all else, the narrator is a hearer of stories – he listens to what other people tell him and seemingly passes these stories on to the readers of the text. This trait is obvious from the story's first chapter, in which he recounts his visits to his friends Gerda and Gerhard Greifenbach and begins to hear, or rather attempts to hear, the story about their intriguing tenant Ginat.<sup>60</sup>

The verb 'to tell' is repeated dozens of times in this chapter.<sup>61</sup> The Greifenbachs tell the narrator that they are about to travel abroad and fear finding the house invaded by squatters upon their return.<sup>62</sup> In passing they mention their tenant, Dr Ginat, who is hardly ever home and thus will be useless in guarding their house – to which the narrator responds with great excitement: "My heart beat fast as I heard this [...] because they had spoken of Ginat as a real person. [...] I had not come across anyone who could say he actually knew him" (145). Once Ginat's name is brought up, the narrator cannot control his curiosity regarding the "world-famous" philologist. Reluctant to expose his intense interest in the reclusive scholar, he tries indirectly to elicit information from his interlocutors, with little success. The conversation becomes a negotiation about telling a story, as well as a discussion about whether there is any story to tell in the first place. "Is he here?" the

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<sup>60</sup> Since Agnon was staying at Gershom Scholem's house when he wrote this story, Gerhard Greifenbach has sometimes been read as Scholem's representative. Weiss, *Mekorot, mivnim*, section 1, 5.

<sup>61</sup> In Hebrew, the verb 'to tell' (a story) and the noun 'story' emanate from the same root, S.P.R. So do the words 'narrator' (*mesaper*) and 'book' (*sefer*).

<sup>62</sup> Kurzweil discusses the home as one of the prominent motifs in the story, which is filled with people leaving their homes, going in and out of them. Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey*, 141-160.

narrator asks, but Gerda, in what will turn out to be a typical gesture, answers laconically: “Oh no, He’s not in”. Finally he asks explicitly: “May I ask what you know about Ginat?”. The Greifenbachs keep supplying the narrator with succinct answers that frustrate him and force him to go on inquiring about the subject of his fascination. “Well if you want to know the whole story, I can tell you, though there’s really nothing to tell”, Gerhard says tantalizingly, but then proceeds to tell only of the day Ginat rented the room from them. “My guess is that Gerda could tell me more”, says the narrator, to which Gerda replies, “I really don’t know any more than what Gerhard has told you”, but Gerhard declares that “Even I can’t tell about things that never were” (147-50).

Little by little, contrary to the Greifenbachs’ insistence that there is “nothing to tell”, the narrator is able to assemble quite a story, or at least the beginnings of one. Ginat, it turns out, had spent only one night in his room before disappearing for months. The Greifenbachs learned of his return not from seeing him but from a woman’s voice coming for his room, speaking “some strange tongue we had never heard before” and singing “in a language we knew nothing about”. “Ginat must have created a girl for himself” was Gerhard’s semi-amused response to this intriguing vocal information (151).<sup>63</sup> The Greifenbachs also show the narrator “two parched brown leaves” that Ginat had given them for their tenth wedding anniversary, telling them they were talismans brought from a far-off country.

As the conversation with the Greifenbachs becomes prolonged, the line between listener and teller becomes diffuse. Though the narrator may well be, as Leah Goldberg portrayed him and

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<sup>63</sup> See my discussion of the Golem toward the end of the chapter.

many other critics have perceived him, “a passive protagonist”, who “stands on the threshold of the story’s world and may sometimes reach his hand to those inside it, converse with them and even tell them something that makes them listen to him, but cannot change anything in their life”,<sup>64</sup> as far as the telling of the story goes he is far from passive or objective. “I am not, of course, a professional scholar”, he testifies of himself, “only a common reader who happens to enjoy anything beautiful that comes his way” (146).<sup>65</sup> This distinction between scholar and reader assumes a particular relevance in the case of “Edo and Enam” in light of its reception as a text for ‘professional readers’ and not ‘common’ ones.<sup>66</sup> Implicitly, however, the narrator also hereby points to himself as a writer who is first a reader, a teller who is first a listener.

The portrayal of the narrator as listener is more evident still in the subsequent five chapters, recounting the two nights he spends at the Greifenbachs’ home. On both nights, Gabriel Gamzu unexpectedly appears at the door and tells him detailed stories of how he became a book dealer, of exceptional manuscripts he has come upon, of his first meeting with Gemulah when he arrived at her distant community injured in both eyes after a desert storm, and of his second visit there, a

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<sup>64</sup> Leah Goldberg, *Ha’ometz lehulin: Behinot ute’amim basifrut hahadashah* [The Audacity of Secularism: Examinations of Modern Literature] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po’alim, 1976), 190-91.

<sup>65</sup> In Hebrew, the comparison is simply between “scholar” and “reader” unqualified by the adjectives “professional” and “common” (270). The immediate context of this self observation is the narrator’s comment about the Enamite Hymns, which are claimed to be masculine by all scholars but the narrator observes their “cadence of a woman’s song” (146). Thus, the moment he proclaims himself as simply a reader and not a scholar is one of the rare moments, if not the only one, in which he doubts what he is told, and, as it turns out, rightfully so.

<sup>66</sup> Kurzweil contends in the opening of his reading that “the role of the literary scholar is nothing like the role of the lay reader”. Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey*, 141.



year later, when he married her and then persuaded her to return with him to Jerusalem. On the first night Gamzu is gravely distressed, as Gemulah has disappeared from her bed and cannot be found. Since the talismans given him by her father, Gevaya ben Ge'uel, were accidentally sold, he believes he cannot guard or contain when the moon is full. On the second night, however, Gamzu claims to have found "a cure" for Gemulah's condition (a garment soaked in cold water left beside her bed), which is why he is confident that she will not wander, and feels free himself to wander.

The story now consists of at least two layers. There are the stories told by Gamzu, whose talkativeness stands in apparent contrast to the laconism of the Greifenbachs, and there is the story told by the narrator, of Gamzu telling his stories and of everything that happens while he does so. The former includes the segments on which most critics chose to focus their readings, the parts perceived as the 'hidden', 'obscure' layer of the text that demanded deciphering, while the latter was read as the explicit, self-evident 'façade'. The narrator, according to this perception, is an objective vessel who simply delivers the facts recounted to him by others. But as the meetings with Gamzu become more and more protracted, it becomes increasingly evident that the narrator is not only a listener but a commentator, that telling a story consists in interpreting it.

The narrator does not appear to be particularly interested Gamzu's lengthy stories, but on one point his curiosity gives him no rest: the reason for the visits Gamzu pays him at the Greifanbachs' on both nights. As he finds Gamzu at his door step on the first night, he is so astonished that, as he reports, "words failed me. After all, I had not told a soul that I would be spending the night at the Greifenbachs' – indeed, I myself hadn't known that I would be here – how then could Gabriel Gamzu have known my whereabouts?" (160). Various speculations about the reason for the visit recur in his mind until Gamzu himself addresses the matter: "I can't understand

why I came here, especially since I saw no light and didn't know you were in the house; but certainly there is some reason for my coming; and even if I don't know the reason, that doesn't remove it"(178). He then interrogates the narrator about "the inhabitants of the house", and the narrator, now taking on the very role filled earlier by the Greifenbachs, tells him only of the owners of the house. Unsatisfied with the answer, Gamzu asks:

'Apart from these people, who else is here?'

'You and I. [...].'

Gamzu picked up his ears. 'And is no one else lodging at the house?'

'There is someone else,' I said, 'who is not at home. Why do you ask?'

Gamzu blushed and said nothing. After a while he asked again, 'What is the name of that lodger?'

I told him.

'Can it be the famous Dr. Ginat?' Said Gamzu. (179)<sup>67</sup>

Gradually, it becomes obvious that Gamzu wishes to hear a story (both directly and as assembled from the sounds he hears), no less than the narrator does, and no less than he, Gamzu, wants to tell one. Arbel points out the conflation of narrating and listening that takes place during their ongoing dialogue: "Like the narrator, Gamzu plays a double role: he is the narrator and the reader who deciphers and interprets the situation/text. Like the narrator, Gamzu investigates and detects and builds the complete story for himself".<sup>68</sup>

What also becomes gradually apparent, with increasing force, is the extent to which the narrator is unreliable as such, or more specifically and accurately, the extent to which he is a

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<sup>67</sup> The following night, the scene almost repeats itself. As Gamzu appears at the door, the narrator is "too amazed to speak. On the previous evening, I had told him distinctly that I was going back home [...] so why on earth had he come here?" After his interrogation Gamzu finally says that he came "not intentionally" (188).

<sup>68</sup> Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 124.

“discordant narrator”. As mentioned earlier, discordant narration suggests a reading that goes against the narrator’s discourse, is signaled silently ‘behind his back’.<sup>69</sup> In the case of “Edo and Enam” the salient aspect of the narrator’s discordance is his inability to piece together the correct story about Gamzu, Gemulah, and Ginat, his systematic misunderstanding and misinterpretation, and above all, his failure to listen adequately to the voices he hears.

The meeting on the second night is governed by a series of strange noises that constantly interfere with the conversation: the opening of a window, spoken words, footsteps on a stone floor, and toward the end of the scene, a voice singing “yiddal, yiddal yiddal, vah pah mah”. Gamzu, intriguingly, first denies hearing anything and then dismisses the noises as “nothing” and later as “hallucinations”,<sup>70</sup> but the narrator notices that Gamzu has “his head bent to one side and an ear turned toward the wall”, looking like someone who “was listening to matters which made him angry” (211). The nocturnal scene of hearing, denying, and dismissing lingers on until “Gamzu’s blood had drained away from his face; only his ears seemed to be alive. He sat there and hearkened with those ears which were all that was left to him of his whole motionless being” (216).<sup>71</sup> Finally, when the singing is heard, Gamzu rushes out of the room and the narrator follows him to Ginat’s room, where he sees “a young woman wrapped in white, her feet bare”, and Gamzu, who “forgot

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<sup>69</sup> Cohn, “Discordant Narration”.

<sup>70</sup> In fact the narrator continuously dismisses them as well. When Gamzu notes that he believes he heard people speaking the language Gemulah used to speak with her father, the narrator dismisses this as the behavior of “a man whose spirit has been broken” (216). Later, when they hear the singing “yiddal, yiddal, yiddal, vah pah, mah”, the drowsy narrator, his eyes shut, thinks to himself, “I am back in my dream” (218).

<sup>71</sup> The verb ‘to hear’ is reiterated in this chapter. A typical example: “‘Can you hear anything?’ He stirred as though from sleep. ‘I can hear nothing, nothing at all. And what about you?’” (211).

all manners and proprieties”: “This chaste man, who had devoted his entire being to his wife, burst into a strange room and embraced a strange woman” (220-21).

The narrator’s typical failure to connect the dots reaches new heights here, verging on the grotesque. Based on all the pieces of information he has so far collected, only some of which I have described here, it is virtually impossible not to reach the conclusion that Gemulah is the woman in Ginat’s room, that the talismans Gamzu received from her father were bought by Ginat, disguised as the sage Gideon, and that the language of Edo and the Enamite Hymns are in fact, respectively, the language spoken by Gemulah with her father and the songs she sings in a foreign tongue. But this is by no means a singular moment of failed understanding and interpretation. For example, when Gamzu tells the narrator of the accidental selling of the talismans written on leaves, he adds that he suspects that Gemulah knows the buyer, who is the sage from Jerusalem who had visited her community, since on the day the talismans were sold she began speaking her native language and singing her song again, which she hadn’t done since her arrival in Jerusalem; yet with all this knowledge at hand, the narrator’s suspicion still, improbably, does not fall on Ginat, who had given the Greifenbachs the two leaves. Indeed he immediately rules out this possibility, posing what is presented as a rhetorical question: “Was it conceivable that a European like Ginat would dress himself up as a Jerusalem sage, and be able to pass himself as such?” (170).

Several critics have noted that the text displays the structural elements of a detective story,<sup>72</sup> not least of which is the convention of a mystery formed before the narrator’s eyes, which

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<sup>72</sup> Arbel writes of the narrator’s investigations and of Gamzu’s, which produce the detective structure that establishes the entire story. Shaked points out the structural conventions of a detective story, and Kurzweil asks: “Is it really the

he struggles to solve – and in this case, even to recognize. In fact, the text itself alludes to the genre when Gerda Greifenbach tells the narrator, “I see you want to turn me into a detective”, to which he answers: “I don’t want you to be a detective. I simply want to hear more about Ginat” (150). In classic detective-story manner, the various fragments of information are given to the readers as well as the detective-narrator so as to allow them to form a thesis that would satisfactorily explain them. But breaking with the genre’s conventions, here the narrator-as-pseudo-detective, far from demonstrating a unique ability to assemble a coherent story from an accumulation of facts, seems devoid of even an average common sense. Moreover, he lacks the basic attitude of wariness and skepticism necessary for any detective: he simply cannot believe that Ginat pretended to be the sage Gideon, nor that Gamzu did not “chance to be” at the Greifenbachs’ house on those two nights but rather came there on purpose because he, Gamzu, unlike the narrator, does seem to be sensibly suspicious.

This possible reading of Gamzu’s character as non-innocent has rarely been acknowledged by critics. The only character whose motives and behavior were called into question is Ginat, who has frequently been suspected of exploiting Gemulah and her love for him in order to gain academic achievements. The legitimacy of his research was also questioned, given that the language he transcribes is an idiosyncratic tongue that Gemulah and her father “made up to amuse

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fascinating plot, almost like a detective story, that causes the reader’s suspension? No, this is not the the heart of the matter – and like always, Agnon’s art is great in the proper use of the secret of silence, in its intermissions that leave room for those emotional aspects which hover above what can be expressed. Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 124; Shaked, “Hipus ahar”, 263; Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey*, 148.

themselves" (215).<sup>73</sup> Whereas Tuchner understands him as emblematic of the "self-serving egoism of scientific research that lacks any emotional relation to the sanctity of the research object",<sup>74</sup> Zemah takes the judgmental view of him to an extreme, describing Ginat as "practical, pragmatic, unromantic and radically evil", someone who is "not a scholar but a fraud", who "exploited Gemulah and deceived the entire world" with his scholarly research, which, since "Edo and Enam never existed", is "nothing but fiction, a lie, an invention".<sup>75</sup> Several critics rejected this portrayal of Ginat, emphasizing, for example, the 'fact' that he sacrificed his life trying to save Gemulah from falling off the roof,<sup>76</sup> his general modesty and reclusiveness, and the lack of any indication that he chases academic prestige.<sup>77</sup> Arbel offers a more balanced view of Ginat's character, in keeping with her general approach to the story, which seeks not to expose any particular fraud but to call attention to the blurred line between the original and the fake. Thus, according to Arbel, while the act of documenting Gemulah's idiosyncratic language is perhaps not the unequivocal pursuit of truth of a devoted scholar, nor is it a distinct case of charlatanry performed by a cold hearted cheat – it is a serious act of creation that costs the artist his life.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> See Zahi Weiss's discussion of Gemulah's language and Ginat's "interpretation" of it. Zahi Weiss, *Mot hashekhinah*, 120-23.

<sup>74</sup> Tuchner, *Pesher Agnon*, 122.

<sup>75</sup> Zemah, *Kri'ah tamah*, 41-49.

<sup>76</sup> Though many critics have treated this detail as a fact of the story, it is actually no more than a rumor the narrator hears in the last chapter.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Ashahel, "Hatshuka al pi", 20; Zuker, "Be'ayat haperush", 415.

<sup>78</sup> Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 112-13. Arbel's reading emphasizes the similarities between Gamzu, Ginat, and the narrator, over their more frequently attended oppositions.

At times, the critical evaluation of Ginat's character came to function also as an implicit discussion of the narrator's literary status. Tuchner, who as aforementioned identifies the narrator with the author, is bothered by the discordance between the narrator's praise of Ginat and the story's critical representation of him. To resolve this tension, he ascribes the criticism to an 'inner sense' of the author, which stands in contrast to the praise bestowed within the "story's frame".<sup>79</sup> Zemah, whose reading generally tends toward suspiciousness, depicts the narrator as "unreliable" and "naïve" – also in the context of his attitude to Ginat. Ashahel, who severely criticizes Zemah's reading, describing it as "paranoid", illustrates what he regarded as the latter's "abuse" of the story's characters with a deprecating paraphrase of Zemah's claims: "Ginat – a fraud who chases glory; the narrator – unreliable",<sup>80</sup> casting the claim of the unreliability of the narrator as a personal attack by a critic against a character in the story. Barzel indicates the different points of view presented in the story concerning Ginat, and especially the narrator's fondness of him. He then contends that "It is clear that as far as Agnon's verdict regarding his protagonists goes, one must take into account the position of the 'narrating I' and favor it, since it is this position that governs the course of the story".<sup>81</sup> Hence, while he formally acknowledges the existence of a literary construct to which he refers as the 'narrating I', Barzel is in fact unwilling to distinguish it from Agnon and his position, to find an ironic gap, for instance, between 'Agnon's evaluation' of his characters and the narrator's.

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<sup>79</sup> "There is no doubt that despite the praise bestowed by the author on Dr Ginat and his enterprise, inside him there is a latent, uncompromising resistance to his being". Tuchner, *Pesher Agnon*, 120.

<sup>80</sup> Ashahel, "Hatshuka al pi", 21-22.

<sup>81</sup> Hillel Barzel, *Sipurey ahava shel S.Y. Agnon* [Agnon's Love Stories] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1975), 83.

But even the most wary critics understood Gamzu as an innocent, helpless victim of circumstance who arrived at the Greifenbachs' house "unknowingly" as part of a chain of events that lacks logical causality.<sup>82</sup> Shaked, for example, though he notes the detective-story conventions imbedded in the text, speaks nonetheless of an "irrational causality" that governs the story and contends that Gamzu is simply "drawn to this mysterious house, without guessing that here his fate would be determined [...] by a series of accidental events".<sup>83</sup>

Only very rarely was the option of Gamzu's lack of innocence, the option that he harbors questionable motives, raised. Brandwein briefly notes that Gamzu's "excuses" for arriving at the Greifenbachs' are "suspicious", and Arbel points out the possibility that, contrary to his declarations, Gamzu might be drawn to the house by partial bits of knowledge and mundane doubts and speculations, and that his repeated questions about Ginat suggest more than simple curiosity.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, as I have indicated, even if one does not fully adopt the thesis that Gamzu knowingly and intentionally turned up at the Greifenbachs' house because he suspected Gemulah's affair with Ginat, this is at the very least a valid interpretive option suggested both by the dwelling upon the question of his reasons for arriving at the house and by the questionable answers offered by him and by the narrator, as well as by his insistent suspicion that someone other than the Greifenbachs is living in the house.

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<sup>82</sup> I refer specifically to Bahat's formulation, but it is a highly typical one. Bahat, *Iyunei mikra*, 163-64.

<sup>83</sup> Shaked, "Hipus ahar", 262-63.

<sup>84</sup> Brandwein, "Mashma umivne", part 2; Arbel, *Katuv al oro*, 127



Acknowledging the possibility (at least) that Gamzu's arrival at the house is not fully accidental and unpurposed sheds interesting light on the protracted stories he tells the narrator. These tales about the archaic and mystical world of the Gad tribe, conceived by critics as the story's core, are perhaps, given this reading, merely a 'cover story' that allows Gamzu to remain in the house and hold the narrator's attention long enough to verify his suspicions. Such an interpretation inverts the relation of 'outer' and 'inner', or 'overt and 'covert', text. Gamzu's tales are in many ways the most overt part of "Edo and Enam", narrated out loud in great detail to the point of exhaustion. Conversely, the 'other text', the realistic plot of a love triangle, is not explicated at all until the very end and requires a reading that is attentive and, moreover, literal: a reading that would opt for mundane explanations over 'dreams' and 'hallucinations'; that would interpret the sound of steps on the roof as a sign simply of steps on the roof.

Gamzu's one blind eye was perpetually interpreted as a metaphor for his inability to read the reality of his life, yet in truth the prominent metaphor for interpreting in this nocturnal text is hearing and listening, which Gamzu, who is 'all ears', can do very well, unlike the narrator, whose ears are, metaphorically at least, blunt. On this view, Gamzu is in greater control of the story than the narrator, not because he does most of the telling but because he is able, through the telling of these stories, to verify the story he suspects to be unfolding, a verification that entails transitioning from listening to viewing. And indeed, the final chapter, occurring thirty days after the scene in Ginat's room and after his and Gemulah's death, is governed by a shift from sound to vision.

In *Only Yesterday* Agnon launches the interpretative discourse in the novel itself with the successive readings of Balak offered within the narrated world. Since these readings and those who perform them are portrayed in a rather explicitly ironic tone, no critic has suggested understanding them as anything but grotesque. Here, however, in “Edo and Enam”, the option of reading the internal reading as a misreading, the narrator’s interpretation as a misinterpretation, was often missed – or misinterpreted. In the final chapter, looking back in retrospect, the narrator himself hints at his own blindness:

But what truly amazed me was this: with my own eyes I had seen Gamzu snatch his wife away, and yet it seemed to me that it was only a story, like the one he himself told me, of how on one occasion dances were held, and Gadi ben Ge’im was about to seize Gemulah, and Gamzu forestalled him. There is no event whose mark has not gone before it. (225)<sup>85</sup>

While seemingly marking an ontological difference between the story that the narrator saw and the one he had heard, the former ostensibly ‘truer’ than the latter, the passage in fact underscores the parallel status of both stories as such.

The narrator’s failure to listen (later ‘translated’ into a failure to see) and, as a result, his failure to constitute the authoritative voice of the text gives rise to the need for another ear and another voice. Barthes, employing the metaphor of hearing and deafness, bestows this task on the reader. Referring to Greek tragedy, which is woven of words with double meaning that each character can only understand unilaterally, Barthes states that there is nonetheless someone who

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<sup>85</sup> The notion that “There is no event whose mark has not gone before it” is essential to the understanding of the story according to Gilad, who stresses foreshadowing as a prominent motif. Gilad, “He’arot al interpretatzia”.

understands each word in its duplicity, who “hears the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him – this someone is precisely the reader”. To Barthes, the text is made up of multiple writings, and the reader, not the author, is the locus of this multiplicity: “A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination”.<sup>86</sup>

In Foucault’s analysis, on the other hand, its seat is the author, as both a figure and a function. It is not the real writer, who should not, as Foucault stresses, be equated with the author any more than the fictitious speaker should. Foucault refers to a novel narrated in the first person when he writes of the author as a function that “is carried out and operated in the scission itself,<sup>87</sup> in this division and this distance”.<sup>88</sup> Even in modern literary criticism, which shuns questions of authentication, the author, Foucault shows, still provides the basis for explaining the transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications that occur in the text. He is the principle of a unity of writing.<sup>89</sup>

From the gap formed in “Edo and Enam” between the narrator’s story and the one constructed by the reader, the figure or the function of the author emerges, and along with it –

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<sup>86</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image, Music, Text*, sel. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), 148.

<sup>87</sup> That is, the scission between the fictitious speaker and the real writer.

<sup>88</sup> Foucault, “What is an Author”, 152. Foucault stresses that not only fiction narrated in the first person but all discourses endowed with an author-function possess this “plurality of self”. Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Foucault and Barthes differ less than my pitting of their texts against each other may suggest: while Barthes’ text is something of a manifesto calling for the ‘killing’ of the author and the rousing of the reader, Foucault analyses the figure of the author as it functions within given discourses. His analysis is explicitly judgmental: “The author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of signification within a world where one is thrifty [...] with one’s discourses and their signification. The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning”. Foucault, “What is an Author”, 159.

writing. Eventually, all the stories told and those who tell them are subjected to the same story they attempt to tell and to the author whose name they bear. It is the written text that manufactures the fictive spoken one. Writing does not record or transcribe a speech that preceded it, as the literary illusion would have us believe. In “Edo and Enam”, because of the pattern of names, because of the sheer artificiality of a world assembled from variations on Agnon’s name, it is virtually impossible to sustain this illusion. Derrida, as I have said in previous chapters, thinks of the name as the margins of language, and following him I have suggested thinking of it as the margins of fiction. Foucault writes of the name of the author as the edge of text: “The author’s name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of discourse to the real and exterior individual who produces it: instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing its mode of being”.<sup>90</sup> Agnon’s name, a literary construct to begin with, constantly reverberates within the vocal sphere of noises and spoken words, marking the writing that is not the representation of voice, not a “signifier of a signifier”, and thereby suggesting that “there is no linguistic sign before writing”.<sup>91</sup>

In the story, however, Ginat’s written texts turn out to be a transcription of Gemulah’s spoken language and her songs. The voices that Gamzu and the narrator keep hearing belong to Gemulah, who enunciates her words in return for the attention of the scribe who writes them down. This intricate figure of writing – Agnon who writes Ginat writing the words of Gemulah – calls to mind another figure, brought up by the Greifenbach’s early suggestion that “Ginat had created a

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<sup>90</sup> Foucault, “What is an Author”, 147.

<sup>91</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 7, 14.

girl for himself” by the power of his written words. The story of the Golem, a creature brought to life but also destroyed by the power invested in the letters written on him, is not only hinted at but openly discussed when the narrator and his interlocutors refer to the legend of Solomon Ibn Gabirol who created for himself a woman that would serve him,<sup>92</sup> as well as to Goethe’s *Faust*.

The idea that Ginat created Gemulah turns out to be a mistake, but the story does not end here. It ends with death – that of Gemulah and Ginat, whose fatal fall is delivered indirectly, as a rumor. The narrator first finds out about their death in a newspaper report announcing the death of a certain “Dr. Gilat”. “Since I was not acquainted with any person of that name, I did not linger over the news. But my heart sank and [...] I began to wonder if there was a misprint and ‘l’ had been substituted for ‘n’” (227). No one knows just what happened and why, and the explanation that Ginat died while trying to save Gemulah, reported to the narrator by Amrami and his granddaughter Edna who heard it from “eyewitnesses”, is not further substantiated. Indeed, one detail implies, on the contrary, that Ginat may have known his death to be near: after he dies, only “two tins full of the ash of burnt papers” are found in his room, as well as “a deed of annulment, in which Ginat canceled the fights of the publishers to bring out his books” (231-32). However, “As usual, the dead man’s orders were not carried out. On the contrary, his books are printed in increasing numbers”. The text ends with the lasting nature of the written words, with the endurance and the glorification of the name of their author, and with a visual metaphor: “While a great scholar lives those who choose to see his learning, see it, those who do not, see nothing

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<sup>92</sup> This legend is mentioned in Scholem’s study of the Golem. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 199. As mentioned earlier, Hagbi points to the anagrammatic relation between Gemulah and *hagolem* (the golem).

there. But once he is dead, his soul shines out ever more brightly from his works, and anyone who is not blind, anyone who has the power to see, readily makes use of his light" (Ibid).

Echoing the opening of "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight", "Edo and Enam" ends with a written, signed text that operates in the absence of its sender, an absence "from the mark that he abandons, and which cuts itself off from him and continues to produce effects independently of his presence and of the present actuality of his intentions". In his absence, Ginat's last note, intended to arrest the "essential iterability" and "citationality" of his written text, is disregarded, and his writing, which "seems to be written 'in his name'", continues to act and to be readable.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 5-8.

## Conclusion

### 1.

S.Y. Agnon died in 1970. The following year, his last, unfinished novel was published: *Shira*. Like all his novels, *Shira* exhibits a distinct preoccupation with names. The text, which takes place in Jerusalem of the 1930s, opens with the middle-aged protagonists Manfred and Henrietta Herbst, parents of two grown up daughters, at the hospital, awaiting the birth of their third and unexpected child. In the maternity ward Manfred meets the nurse Shira and their affair goes on to become the novel's focal point.

Early on (within the first chapter) it becomes clear that Manfred is obsessed not only with Shira but also with her name. In the privacy of his own inner world he calls her Nadia (for no apparent reason) and refuses to accept the name Shira. And so the narrative, which is not entirely restricted to his consciousness but often adheres to it, vacillates between the names: "Nadia, i.e., Shira, i.e., Nadia, opened a pack of cigarettes and said [...]". The name given to the character and also to the entire novel in which Manfred is written is a name that he resists and insists on changing, once again highlighting through the name the edge of fiction, the line between narration and narrated. The discrepancy between the name used by the narrator and the one employed by the protagonist is plain from the very first appearance of both names. In the first chapter the readers meet 'Nadia' just before meeting 'Shira': "That nurse, the one he called Nadia, was back

again. Her name was actually Shira. Her father, a Hebrew teacher and an early Zionist, called her Shira after his mother, Sarah”.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas in *A Simple Story*, the pivotal scenes of naming newborns unfolded only indirectly, in *Shira*, the act of naming is explicitly foregrounded. After their third daughter is born, Henrietta and Manfred engage in the following dialogue:

‘And now, my love, let’s get down to essentials. What name will we give our daughter? I should confess I had already given her a name, not one of those new names that are chirped over every cradle, but a name from the Bible.’  
 ‘What do you call her?’ Manfred asked. Henrietta answered, ‘What do I call her? If I tell you, you’ll agree.’ ‘So?’ Manfred asked impatiently. ‘So,’ Henrietta answered, ‘So I call her Sarah.’ Manfred heard and was silent. After a while he asked, ‘Why did you choose that name?’ Henrietta looked at her husband with special affection and answered with a question, ‘Wasn’t your mother called Sarah?’ Manfred nodded and said, ‘Yes, my mother’s name was Sarah, but she was called Serafina.’ Henrietta said, ‘Tell me this, my love. Can a child be called Serafina in this country?’ Manfred said, ‘It’s truly impossible.’ Henrietta said, ‘So let’s name her for your mother’s grandmother, who was probably called Sarah.’ Manfred said, ‘Yes, yes. Of course, Henrietta. Of course.’ Henrietta said, ‘Unless you prefer one of those new names, such as Aviva or Ziva.’ At this point Henrietta puckered her lips and chirped like one of those women, the mothers of Aviva and Ziva. ‘Avivale Zivale. [...]’.<sup>2</sup>

While the nurse Shira is ‘named after’ Sarah, little Sarah is named after Manfred’s mother who was not called Sarah but Serafina, leading Henrietta to assume the grandmother’s grandmother was “probably called Sarah”, thereby supplying herself with a retroactive motivation for the name she had chosen. Thus The ritual of naming after, whose entire purpose is the preservation of memory, appears twice in a distorted form.

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<sup>1</sup> S.Y. Agnon, *Shira*, trans. Zeva Shapiro (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 4. In Hebrew: S.Y. Agnon, *Shira* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 30-31.



But what surfaces most resonantly here is that the act of naming occurs in a unique time and place, within a particular historical and ideological context – one in which there are “those new names” that are not like the old ones, as well as names that can be given “in this country” and others that cannot. The drama of naming extends beyond the borders of the bourgeois household, and is no longer a matter of a singular encounter between namer and named. It is now a national, all encompassing drama animated by forceful ideological institutions that designate ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ names and see to it that the latter are substituted by the former.

Agnon’s typical drama of naming is rarely as overtly ‘political’ as it appears in the opening of *Shira*. In the scenes described above we meet a father whose Zionism inspires him to change the ‘old’ name of his mother, Sarah, to the ‘new’ name of his daughter, Shira. Meanwhile, Manfred and Henrietta, bearing foreign, ‘diasporic’ names, name their daughter Sarah, an ‘old’, biblical name but one that is, unlike their own names, Hebrew. Sarah, we learn from the parents’ dialogue, is not like Serafina, a foreign name that cannot be given “in this country”, but also unlike Aviva and Ziva, the distinctly new names, which Henrietta dislikes and mocks.

## 2.

Agnon’s depiction of naming in these scenes reflects a dramatic and extraordinary era in the history of Jewish names and naming, a time of onomastic revolution during which “[t]he new Hebrew names became a Zionist symbol that distinguishes between Jews from the Diaspora and

Jews from the Land of Israel”, as Oz Almog writes in *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*.<sup>3</sup> Stressing the symbolic role of the name as a Hebrew marker that designated ‘the Sabra’, Almog describes the practice of giving ‘new Hebrew names’ to newborn children as well as changing the names of immigrants upon their arrival in Palestine. “Hebraicization of the new immigrant’s name was an important mechanism in the process of acculturation. It meant one was closing the door to the Diaspora past and rectifying one’s old ‘Jewish personality’. It was part of the ‘conversion’ of the proselyte into the Zionist national religion, a ceremony that required (as in most religions) giving up one’s previous identity and adopting a new one”.<sup>4</sup>

The revolution of the new Hebrew name began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the first Zionist immigration waves, and formed part of a wider endeavor to ‘renew’ the Hebrew language and instate it as the national language of Jews in Palestine. Regarding patterns of given names, scholars distinguish between two main phases. At first, “new-old” names from the biblical and Mishnaic periods (and in particular names of biblical heroes) were popular. These names were an integral part of the ancient Hebrew cultural legacy, but had not been in use for many centuries. The second phase was marked by the introduction of “new new” names, invented names that alluded to the national revival, as well as names derived from those of local rocks, plants, animals, etc.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 91.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

However, Maoz Azaryahu contends that the most distinct manifestation of the conversion of names as a declarative Zionist act occurred in the realm of family names.<sup>6</sup> The Hebraicization of 'diasporic' family names expressed the dissociation from a biographical and congregational legacy that was identified with the Diaspora. Typically, it followed one of two patterns: either the lexical meaning, or at least a certain lexical component of the name, was translated into Hebrew, or else the new name was chosen for its phonetic resemblance to the old one.<sup>7</sup> In either case the transformation of the name from 'diasporic' to 'Hebrew' almost always involved a certain act of translation. The proper name, forever untranslatable as Derrida has shown, was situated in a reality of obsessive and aggressive translation.

The powerful ideological apparatuses in charge of this extraordinary era of name changing operated in multiple ways, some more institutionalized and explicit, even coercive, and others more covert. Most name changes were perceived as a personal, voluntary act,<sup>8</sup> but sometimes the desired outcome was accomplished with the open intervention of the agents of socialization. In schools and immigrant transit camps, Almog notes, teachers and social counselors urged pupils and

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<sup>6</sup> While the transition into modern, local given names characterizes most immigrant societies, the adoption of new family names is a much more unique phenomenon. Maoz Azaryahu, "Ivrit ve'ivrut: Hebetim shel yetzirat zehut tarbutit" [Hebrew and Hebraicization: Aspects Cultural Identity Formation], *Mada'ei hayahadut* 40 (2000): 79-80. On the uniqueness of the phenomenon in relation to other immigrant societies see also Almog, *The Sabra*, 94.

<sup>7</sup> Gidon Turi, "Ivrit shmot mishpaha be'Eretz Israel ke'tirgum tarbuti': Targil shildi bemisgeret hasemiotica shel hatarbut" [Hebraicization of family names in Eretz Israel as 'cultural translation': An exercise in Cultural Semiotics], in *Nekudot tazpit: Tarbut vehevra be'Eretz Israel* [Perspectives on Culture and Society in Israel], ed. Nurit Gertz (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1988), 158-60.

<sup>8</sup> This perception is reflected in the texts of scholars who write on the subject. Azaryahu describes the changing of names as mostly "a personal decision". Almog writes: "In fact there was almost no need for propaganda to promote the Hebraicization of family names, since the negative badge of the Diaspora motivated many immigrants (especially those absorbed into Sabra organizations) to do so voluntarily at the time of their immigration or soon afterward". Azaryahu, "Ivrit ve'ivrut", 81; Almog, *The Sabra*, 94.

their parents to Hebraicize both names. In the Israeli Army, a special name committee was appointed, later issuing a booklet entitled *How to Choose a Hebrew Name*, with an introduction explaining the importance of the Hebraicization of foreign names.<sup>9</sup> David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, issued a regulation requiring all senior Army officers and those holding official state positions to Hebraicize their family names. Ben Gurion persisted in his Hebraicization efforts even in encounters with 'ordinary' citizens whose names he found objectionable, often even offering a particular substitute.<sup>10</sup>

Another aspect, this time fully institutionalized, of the Hebraicization of names, involved the systematic replacement of Arabic place names with Hebrew ones. In 1949 Ben Gurion appointed a committee whose task was to "designate Hebrew names for all places, mountains, valleys, springs, roads, etc. in the Negev area". A letter sent to the committee by Ben Gurion stated that "We must remove the Arabic names for political reasons; just as we do not acknowledge the Arabs' political ownership of the land, so we do not acknowledge their spiritual ownership and their names".<sup>11</sup> A year later it was suggested that the committee's mandate be expanded to include the northern

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<sup>9</sup> Almog, *The Sabra*, 94.

<sup>10</sup> Azaryahu, "Ivrit ve'ivrut", 81-82.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Meron Benvenisti, "Hamapa ha'ivrit" [The Hebrew Map], *Teoria uvikoret* 11 (1997): 8-9. Benvenisti offers an elaborate discussion of the national project of the Hebraicization of place names, which was presented as an act of 'salvaging' ancient Hebrew names but in fact was achieved almost entirely through the distortion of existing Arabic names. The majority of new names were either a translation (often a distorted one) or a phonetic variant of the Arabic name, echoing the patterns that governed the conversion of family names.

parts of Israel, and in 1951 the “National Name Committee” was established and charged with assigning Hebrew names to all geographical components of the national landscape.<sup>12</sup>

Naming as an interpellative and transformative operation rarely finds such palpable manifestation. The assumption underlying the Zionist naming revolution clearly was that one cannot be a new Hebrew man or woman so long as one bears an old name, and moreover, that once a new name is given, whether to a person or a place, something new is created. Names can produce new people and a new reality.

Hebrew literature by authors of Agnon’s generation and after reflects this extraordinary era on two levels. At the level of the work of fiction, the Zionist preoccupation with changing names and giving new names finds its way into the literary texts; but the more noticeable phenomenon is the changing of names by the authors themselves. In his generation, Agnon was the only major writer to change his diasporic name (Tchatchkes) to a new, Hebrew name. His contemporaries, including Yosef Hayim Brenner, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Natan Alterman, Shaul Tchernichovsky, Leah Goldberg, and Avraham Shlonsky, some of whom were identified more closely with the Zionist project than Agnon, kept their original names.<sup>13</sup> However, among the following generations (the ‘*Palmah* generation’ and even more so in the ‘state generation’) the majority of novelist and poets changed their names to new Hebrew names: Yizhar Smilansky concealed his family name and

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<sup>12</sup> Azaryahu, “Ivrit ve’ivrut”, 83-84.

<sup>13</sup> In 1951 a member of the Haifa municipal name committee proposed a regulation stipulating that only Hebrew names be given to local streets. Another member countered that such rigorous Hebrew puritanism would lead to the erasure of such names as Bialik and Tchernichovsky. Azaryahu, “Ivrit ve’ivrut”, 86.

became S. Yizhar, Moshe Tehilimzeiger changed his name first to Moshe Sha'oni and then to Dan Ben-Amotz,<sup>14</sup> Pinchas Sadeh was originally Pinhas Feldman, Natan Zeitelbach became Natan Zach,<sup>15</sup> Yehudah Foiffer turned into Yehuda Amichai, and Amos Kloizner came to be Amos Oz.

The tension between the old and new names and the conflicts such transitions produced seeped into certain literary works written during and about the period of the establishment of the Israeli state. In Hayim Hazaz's seminal short story "The Sermon" ("*Hadrashah*", 1943), for example, the protagonist, Yudke, considers the difference between 'shamefully' Jewish names and names that do not resonate as Jewish: "A man of the Yishuv is ashamed to be called by an ordinary, common Jewish name and is proud to be called, say, Artzieli or Avnieli. Haimovitch, you will agree yourselves, is a Jewish name – too Jewish; while Avnieli – that's something else altogether, the devil knows what. It has a strange, non-Jewish, ring to it. Such pride! And this is why we have many Gideons, Ehuds, Yigals, Tirtzas".<sup>16</sup>

Another example is found in Aharon Megged's story "*Yad vashem*" (1955), whose central theme is the clash of memory and new names.<sup>17</sup> The story presents a bitter conflict between

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<sup>14</sup> Almog, *The Sabra*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> His name reflects another Hebraicization pattern, in which the new name was formed from the first and last letter of the original name. In general, short names were preferred over long ones. Turi, "Ivrut shmot mishpaha", 160; 157.

<sup>16</sup> Hayim Hazaz, *Sipurim nivharim* [Selected Stories] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1952), 200.

<sup>17</sup> Aharon Megged, "Yad vashem", in *Hatzot Hayom: Mivhar* [Midday, A Selection] (Hakibutz hame'uhad, 1973), 74-86. *Yad vashem*, whose literal meaning is 'hand and name', is a biblical phrase from Isaiah 56:5, designating a memorial or a monument. In the New Revised Standard Version it is rendered "a monument and a name".

Grandpa Ziskind, whose beloved grandson Mendele perished in the Holocaust, and his pregnant granddaughter Raayah, whose imminent child Grandpa Ziskind wishes to name Mendele. To this request, Raayah and her husband respond: “Madness! The child would be miserable his whole life”, and Raayah adds that Mendele is a “diasporic name, ugly, awful! There is no way I would be able to speak such a name. Do you want me to hate my own child?” The couple won’t even consider the name Menakhem, suggested as a compromise by Raayah’s mother, the mediator in the conflict, who presents it as a beautiful Israeli Hebrew name: “Menakhem can only be given to a weak child, unattractive, short”, Raayah rules.<sup>18</sup> The refusal to give the newborn child an old name is explicitly presented in “*Yad vashem*” as the erasure of memory. “You’re ashamed to name your son Mendele”, Grandpa Ziskind exclaims, “lest it remind you that there were once Jews called by that name. You want to erase that name from the face of the earth, so that there is no remainder of it left...”.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.

Agnon’s own adoption of a new name, realized at a time when the gesture had not yet become nearly mandatory, not only preceded the wave of name changes by authors but was also fundamentally unique. Agnon did not translate his name: the new name he chose for himself had nothing to do with the old one, lexically or phonetically. In Agnon’s case, the decision to take a new name (first only as a pen name and later for every purpose) as well as the choice of name is a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 79-81. The rich associative meaning that a name bears, discussed in chapter 2, is explicitly articulated here.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 83.

complex act that suggests a reflexive awareness of its own complexity. The name was taken from the title of one of Agnon's literary works. Moreover, despite its modern Hebrew air, Agnon's name was coined from a term – *agunah* – that unmistakably connotes the old, traditional Jewish world. Specifically, *agunah* designates a predicament that involves being hopelessly caught between an obsolete, inescapable obligation, and a new and not fully attainable condition. The dichotomy between old and new is thus assimilated into the name Agnon, embedding the traditional Jewish existence into a name whose ostensible *raison d'être* is the suppression of this old world. In light of Agnon's conception of names as a determining force, and in light of the cultural and political context I described above, one cannot but wonder: would Agnon have become 'Agnon', the celebrated Hebrew author, had he not changed his name?

Like his name, Agnon's fiction also touches upon historical and political conflicts (such as the one displayed in Megged's story, for example) in an intricate, subtle manner. In general, Agnon does not tend toward explicit literary treatments of burning issues, and it has often been noted, for example, that he never produced a direct literary response to the holocaust. Even in *Shira*, the tension between the 'Zionist name' and the commemoration of deceased relatives is reflected, but not elaborated. The fact that naming a 'Shira' after a 'Sarah' amounts to a subversion of the memory mechanism is left for the readers to infer. Agnon's perpetual deliberation on names, as I have discussed it in this work, is not a concrete reaction to the historical era in which names became prominent participants in the political reality and naming assumed the status of a common subject of interest in Hebrew culture. His deliberation is rather a profound, ongoing project. His rich conceptual investigation of names creates a significant foundation on the basis of which such a



revolutionary era may be better understood. Through the literary text Agnon examines the relationships between names, namers, bearers, meaning, memory, and fate.

That said, Agnon's names and naming are always deeply rooted in a Jewish context. Whether the narrative takes place in Eastern Europe or in Palestine, Agnon's protagonists bear Jewish names; the naming in his fiction always follows Jewish customs and often reflects Jewish concepts (such as *hashem gorem*); and the plots within which his names operate are almost underpinned by something that may be described as a 'Jewish conflict', whether historical, cultural, political, or religious. The question then emerges of whether Agnon's thought about names is universal – a meditation on 'proper names' per se – or else suggests that there is such a thing as a 'Jewish name', whose qualities, functions, and operations are unique and not necessarily applicable to all proper names. I suspect that this question does not admit of a final settlement, leaving us to search for the answer somewhere in between these poles.

In Agnon's works, names are often posited in situations of extreme crisis and lead to drastic consequence. Names can change lives – for better or worse, although Agnon chooses mostly to contemplate the latter. And so, name can destroy lives, names can kill. In Agnon's literary world, they are ultimately a site of catastrophe.

In the early novella "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight", Agnon addresses the name's most fundamental function – reference. He does so, as I have described, by depicting a name in the midst of a severe referential crisis, as it is disengaged from its bearer. The protagonist, Mensahe Hayim, sells his name to another man based on the assumption that he and his name stand in a

certain opposition: a choice is to be made between life and name. Eventually it turns out that there is no life for Menashe Hayim without his name, or even that there is no Menashe Hayim to speak of once he is stripped of his name. The name, it appears, was not 'his' to sell in the first place: Menashe Hayim belongs to his name more than the name belongs to him. At this point, the rectifying option of name as memory enters the story, implying an additional function of the name entirely different from the referential one. The end of the novella, which seemingly reunites the protagonist with his name, offers several interpretations of its own denouement. While the narrator's version suggests that the protagonist is finally given "Name and remainder", the protagonist's reading of his own story is far more severe: for him, neither name nor memory is left behind. The broken link between man and name that determines his fate cannot, in Menashe Hayim's version of his story, be repaired.

In *A Simple Story*, a more intricate discussion of the link between name and bearer is presented, one that takes into consideration the meaning of names and the potential of this meaning (a multi-faceted term, as I have argued) to affect the bearer. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist, Hirshl Hurvitz, is preoccupied with an almost philosophical inquiry into the question of whether and how names fit their bearers. This uncharacteristic curiosity is related to the name of his beloved, Blume, a name that has more than one meaning and which, like all names but more overtly so, must be translated and cannot be translated, existing as they do on the edge of language. But as the plot unfolds and the drama of naming escalates, Hirshl's question is revealed to be the wrong one: the adequate question is no longer 'what is the meaning of a name?', but rather 'what does it mean to give a name?' Accordingly, it is not the name that is either 'right' or 'wrong' in a constative (or descriptive) manner, but the naming that is 'right' or 'wrong' in the

moral sense. The question of the accordance between name and bearer runs through the novel, and at its conclusion, a newborn child is not given a name, or else his name is given but not used. Here, I have suggested, the beginning of an understanding emerges that names do not simply fit or fail to fit their bearers but also *make* their bearers, mold and affect them. The non-name of the child born at the end of *A Simple Story* may thus be read as a deliberate refusal to name, a defiance of the interpellative power of names.

What appears as a hint of the performative potential of names at the end of *A Simple Story* ripens into a central and overt preoccupation in *Only Yesterday*, where naming is presented as an interpellative, and moreover, destructive force. The injurious name the human protagonist, Yitzhak, writes on the canine protagonist's skin and which is later misread and becomes the dog's proper name, determines the bleak fate of both Yitzhak and Balak. The latter is almost a theoretical experiment in the injurious, subjugating power of names. The name by which he is called – crazy dog – indeed turns him into such a dog, but the name's unintended effect is that the dog becomes a subject, even, to some extent, a linguistic subject. His urge to understand the inscription on his back, the injustice of its writing, and the misery its readings cause him, eventually drive him to the vengeful reunion with the source of the inscription, with Yitzhak. *Only Yesterday* brings the evolution of Agnon's understanding of names to its inevitable extreme, where it meets ideological notions of naming as a major component in the exercise of power and violence. Whereas Menashe Hayim's crisis was precipitated by the loss of the name, by the fragility of the link between himself and his name, Balak's predicament is reversed: he cannot rid himself of the hostile name he was given and therefore cannot escape the violent responses it triggers. Naming, in this novel, turns out to encompass not just the unique one-time event in which the name is first assigned, but also all

subsequent moments of the reading, misreading, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and mistranslation of this name.

In “Edo and Enam” the operation of names takes an entirely different form. The story is not so much *about* a name as it is assembled *from* a name, and not just any name but “the name of the author”. In Agnon’s work there appears to exist a recurring relation between name and story. The story of Menashe Hayim is the only remainder left, in place of the lost name that cannot, according to the protagonist, be recovered. In *A Simple Story*, names are substituted by other names, but sometimes, for example with Meshulam’s name, they are substituted by poems. And in *Only Yesterday*, the fictiveness of the name ‘Balak’ constitutes the grounds for understanding the entire story as a fictive story, a category that the narrator describes, perhaps not merely sarcastically, as worthless, “zero”.

But in “Edo and Enam” the name itself becomes a story: it is the linguistic material from which the story is made up. The motivation of names versus their arbitrariness, a fundamental issue underlying the entire conceptual understanding of names, manifests itself in a unique way in “Edo and Enam”. All names are distinctly motivated not to those who bear them, as the ‘motivation of the name’ typically implies, but to the author, to the one who gives them. Thus, inevitably, a certain level of arbitrariness permeates the link between names and the characters that bear them. In this way, the textual texture, the existence of the text as such, i.e. as a fictional artifact, is continually underscored. The unique operation of names in “Edo and Enam” is inseparable from the ars-poetic matters that form the story’s core, issues of authorship and ownership of narratives and texts. Agnon composes a story from his own name (an author-name), giving it to all characters and all places – and this in a text that constantly poses such questions as, who is telling the story and who

is listening to it; where does the telling end and the interpreting begin; who leads the story and who is led by it. Read through this prism, which has the effect of inverting some of the major critical presuppositions about what constitutes the 'center' and the 'periphery' of the text, its 'explicit' and 'covert' aspects, the story's enigmatic rigid structural principle of naming is placed within a conceptual context that endows it with significance. At the same time, the naming principle itself is the very ground for the conceptual understanding of the literary text.

This is what names do in Agnon's literary world: they often hold the key to a richer interpretation of the text. Many seemingly obscure moments in Agnon's work are illuminated when names are carefully considered; many moments that critics have dwelled on can be interpreted anew; and other moments that have been overlooked gain sudden interpretative significance when examined through the lens of names and naming.

As a conceptual framework for reading literature, the power of names and naming is not confined to Agnon's fiction. In my view, many works and authors invite such a reading. In contemporary Hebrew literature, a number of authors may be perceived as Agnon's descendents with respect to their treatment of names. Yoel Hoffman, Ronit Matalon, and Dror Burstein are all eminent writers who engage, like Agnon, in a literary meditation on proper names. The particular complexities of Israeli politics and culture constitute the backdrop for their reflections and sometimes indeed provide their substance (for instance, key issues of immigration and translation in the works of Hoffman and Matalon), but again like Agnon, these writers also demonstrate an interest in naming as a fundamental operation that sits at the core of the link between language

and non-linguistic reality. The interpretative perspective suggested in the present study is thus not limited to the corpus of a single author, prominent as he may be, but is intended to serve as a blueprint for more readings to come.

Like many Israeli girls born in the year that followed the publication of Agnon's posthumous novel, I myself was named Shira. When I asked my parents, not long ago, whether I was named after the fictional character Shira, they replied without hesitation: "No, we named you after the book. We were so impressed by Agnon's novel". I have thus been named after a literary work. I have been given a name of a text by Agnon; a name of a name by Agnon. In light of this study that explores the performative power of names it is impossible for me not to wonder about the nature of the intriguing line that runs between two points: the one in which I am named after a name by Agnon, and the other in which I plunge myself into writing about Agnon's names.

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