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A Mad Dog's Attack on Secularized Hebrew:
Rethinking Agnon's *Temol shilshom*

TODD HASAK-LOWY

> I know that it would be convenient for the readers and even the good critics were Balak separate and Yitsḥak separate, but I am happy to see them together.
>
> — S. Y. Agnon[1]

> Fraught with danger is the Hebrew language!
>
> — Gershom Scholem[2]

For good reason, most critics who have approached *Temol shilshom* (Only yesterday), S. Y. Agnon's well-known novel about the Second Aliyah (1904–14), have addressed the figure of the dog Balak. Balak enters the narrative almost halfway through the six-hundred-page novel as a stray dog that happens upon the protagonist, Yitsḥak Kummer, an immigrant to Palestine who works as a housepainter and who, after some time in Jaffa, now lives in the old *Yishuv* in Jerusalem. In an act of pure caprice, Yitsḥak paints the words *kelev meshugga*ʿ ("mad dog")[3] on the body of the dog.[4] The residents of numerous Jewish neighborhoods, believing the message on Balak's body, drive him out of their communities. Repeatedly expelled, the once normal stray dog goes mad by the end

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of the novel. In this state, he and Yitsḥak again cross paths, and Balak bites Yitsḥak, who develops rabies and dies as the novel comes to a close.

Balak's central role in the narrative's development and final resolution underscores the need to account for the meaning of Balak's unlikely presence in the novel. Yet Balak disrupts much more than the novel's plot. The sections of *Temol shilshom* devoted to Balak operate in a multifaceted modernist mode, in stark contrast to the panoramic realism of the novel's first three hundred pages. As such, Balak changes not only the direction of the narrative but the very mode of its telling. The idea of a second plot based on the dog Balak came to Agnon early in his efforts to write the novel.[5] Despite the fact that Agnon worked on the construction of his twin plots for more than a decade, the integration of the two strands of the narrative would prove quite difficult and, according to many critics, unrealized. Agnon spent nearly fifteen years writing *Temol shilshom* (1931–45),[6] and even wrote two of his other major novels (*Sippur pashut* [A simple story] and *Oreaḥ natah lalun* [A guest for a night]) during this period. The finished product, while one of Agnon's most celebrated works (and a landmark in modern Hebrew literature in general), remains a highly uneven text. In particular, Agnon's effort to wed the two halves of the novel was never fully realized. According to Dan Miron, the final result of this effort to combine the two suggests a welding together of two still-distinct parts more than a seamless melding into a single unity.[7]

From many angles, most every aspect of the Balak plot—indeed, the very existence of the Balak plot—seems at first glance unexpected and puzzling.[8] Why does Balak appear in the first place? Why does Yitsḥak write on Balak? Why does Yitsḥak write what he writes? Why does this writing become so central to the outcome of the novel? Why does such a seemingly ridiculous plot twist end so tragically? Why did Agnon remain determined to include Balak if his inclusion presented such difficulties to the composition of the novel? In light of questions such as these, it is no surprise that there has been a steady flow of criticism and interpretation concerning the Balak plot, from Kurzweil's original 1946 essay up through one of five chapters in Boaz Arpali's 1998 large-scale work on Agnon's novel, *Rav roman.*[9] In short, this section of the novel seems to call out for the intervention of an able reader who can decipher Balak and who can in the most simple, if not reductive, sense tell us what Balak "means."[10]

The most convincing readings of Balak are those that, rather than attempt to reduce Balak to a one-dimensional figure, address his multiple symbolic meanings. Separately and to different ends, Boaz Arpali, Meshulam Tochner, Arnold Band, and Amos Oz have all persuasively interpreted Balak as representing a combination of Yitsḥak's sexual development, naïveté, self-delusion, and larger psyche. This general approach is easily expanded by understanding Yitsḥak as a complex (albeit largely childish, passive, and ultimately tragic) character and as a synecdochal figure of his generation.[11] Arpali, after using "return of the repressed" and "alter ego" to describe Balak's relation to Yitsḥak, writes:

> [A]ll the impulses and feelings and thoughts that motivate Yitsḥak Kummer, without his knowing (or wanting to know) about them, all the things that he flees from and eludes, all the words that he throws from his mouth without being responsible for their content or their effect . . . join together in the figure of the dog as a single symbolic "package." All of these are the link between Yitsḥak Kummer, who escapes from the truth, and the dog Balak, who hunts it down.[12]

Likewise, Tochner states his thesis: "[Yitsḥak] Kummer and Balak are as much two as they are one. Kummer is the unconscious basis, the emotional and atavistic basis, and Balak is the arrival of this consciousness."[13] Band—who also uses the term "alter ego"—notes that "when Yitsḥak meets Balak in the second, fatal encounter, he is, in a sense, meeting himself."[14] Though Oz devotes most of his attention to interpreting Balak and the numerous other dogs in the novel as a stand-in for woman and Eros (including a suggestive reading of the painting of Balak as an act of intercourse), he also notes:

> The dogs in *Temol shilshom* carry on their backs not a single allegorical meaning but a multiple symbolic load: They parallel Yitsḥak himself, they represent the female sex, they embody erotic instincts, and they are the salvationless sacrifice of a mysterious power which is partly moralistic, partly sadistic.[15]

As stated, these readings are compelling in that they allow each author to delineate the general import of Balak's presence in the novel without reducing him to a single, easily manageable meaning.

Despite my general agreement with these readings of the figure of Balak as briefly summarized here, all four critics ignore or fail to address the crucial role of language in the Balak plot. Yet Yitsḥak's short initial meeting with Balak centers on the act of writing, while virtually everything that happens to Balak, and later to Yitsḥak, after their encounter is a result of the message that Balak carries on his back. Balak is the main agent of the novel's narrative development, and the text "mad dog" sets him in motion. We must ask not only what the relationship is between Balak and Yitsḥak but also why language occupies a central role in this relationship and, by extension, throughout the novel. The only two scholars who have given any extended attention to the question of language in *Temol shilshom* are Aaron Bar-Adon and Anne Golomb Hoffman, both of whom I refer to extensively in what follows.[16] In particular, my argument relies a great deal on and intersects in many places with Hoffman's larger project on Agnon, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing*. Indeed, her earlier research cleared space for my own research, though, as I show below, our readings of the *Temol shilshom* ultimately are quite distinct.[17]

I contend that Agnon's thematization of language resonates with the novel's larger critique of the Zionist ideology of the Second Aliyah. *Temol shilshom* illustrates the myriad ways in which the intended newness of the Zionist project was continually haunted by what it sought to reject, in an extended treatment of the return of the repressed. This mechanism, arguably the central feature in Freud's theory of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious, describes the perpetual urge of what has been repressed to resurface.[18] Though initially a mechanism used to explain the individual mind, Freud himself, in his later work, would find it equally illuminating on the collective level.[19] This model has proven quite useful for interpreting literature as well. Since Zionism understood itself as a radical break from and rejection of Jewish life in the Diaspora, the notion of repression easily suggests itself as one way to view Zionism's intended relationship to the Jewish past. As Michel de Certeau has written, psychoanalytic conceptions of memory, in contrast to historiography, "recognize the past *in* the present; historiography places them one *beside* the other."[20] In other words, a psychoanalytic perspective denies the very possibility of the sort of clean and complete separation from the past that Zionism assumed for itself.

In *Temol shilshom,* Agnon calls on the mechanism of the return of the repressed over and over to ironically represent the failure of Zionist ideology to realize itself in the new *Yishuv.* The realist plot satirizes the emerging Zionist society in Palestine, where religious impulses, unproductiveness, and a longing for the Diaspora still reign. Take, for example, the scene where Agnon describes the collective's Shabbat preparations and celebrations:

> Everyone who was in the sea was plucked from the waves and got up and dried off and got dressed, each and every one his beard shaved and his mustache groomed, for before they went to the sea they dropped by the barber's. They put on clean clothes for Shabbat, cloth pants with a white or gray or blue shirt. They tied their shirts, one with a braided belt and the other with a leather belt. They put shoes on their feet, not of camel skin and not torn, but light shoes, as if strolling. Upon their heads they put, one a straw hat and the other a cap. At the same time the Shabbat candles were lit in the skies above, and their light was visible from the sea. Members of the group community recalled one mother's Shabbat candles, and the other father's table. Verses of liturgical hymns were plucked from their hearts, and intense longing surrounded the melody and made it a different melody, like those waves of the sea, which were the same ones as before, only heavier, fiercer, and more melancholy now.[21]

Here Agnon offers an extended description (I presented less than half of it) of citywide preparations for Shabbat among the Jews of Jaffa. The narrator presents preparatory activities in the context of Shabbat while actually describing behavior that runs counter to traditional Shabbat preparations: swimming in the sea, shaving, and visiting the barber. As the passage continues, the nature of the irony shifts from playful to sober. The key sentence announcing this transition figuratively locates the lighting of the Shabbat candles in the appearance of the evening stars. Agnon maintains the lighter irony of the opening by encouraging the reader to notice that no one in the group lights the "candles"; rather, they are passively lit in the sky. By mentioning the stars' reflection in the sea, the narrator directs the reader back to the passage's opening, inviting us once more to conclude that traditional Shabbat ritual has been neglected, as the Jews bathed in the sea rather than the ritual bath or *mikveh*. As the passage continues, we see that the lighting of the candles—independent of, if not in spite of, the collective's refusal of tradition—signifies a return of this repressed tradition. Intertwined memories of abandoned home, family, and tradition powerfully revisit the immigrant community, causing a collective yearning and sadness. The irony no longer mockingly notes the gap between tradition and tradition forsaken. Rather, here the narrator illustrates the impossibility of simply renouncing or repressing tradition and presents the suffering inherent in this failure.[22]

The Balak plot employs the same mechanism but focuses on two deeper, more elusive, levels: psychology and language. As I discussed above, most previous readings of Balak—with the exception of Hoffman's—have focused on the former; in what follows, I will discuss the question of language. Agnon's thematization of language in *Temol shilshom* through the Balak plot addresses the project of secularizing Hebrew through the enactment of a macabre return of a repressed sacred Hebrew. This part of the novel is composed of two intertwined strands: the narrative repeatedly invokes excommunications as an example of sacred Hebrew at work in Jewish ritual; and various features of the Balak episode echo the Creation story and the golem legend, in which the magical, mystical powers of Hebrew are potently and even dangerously employed to create, name, and give life to a new creature. In both cases, Agnon seems to ask what may be lost by secularizing Hebrew and what is at risk in treating a sacred, mystical language as a mundane vernacular. My reading of *Temol shilshom* does not suggest itself as a replacement for many earlier interpretations of the novel; rather, I suggest viewing Agnon's complex treatment of Hebrew as yet one more thread in the novel's intricate network of inner contradictions. But unlike many earlier treatments of this novel, my reading attempts to explain why such intricacy and inner contradictions are an essential, illuminating feature of this truly monumental work.

"MAD DOG" AS REFERENT AND SIGNIFIER

The trajectory of the Balak plot traces the gradual, steady conflation of referent and signifier, in which the dog (referent) upon whom it is written "mad dog" (signifier) eventually becomes mad. Because this conflation is due to the words written on Balak, these words—*kelev meshugga*ʿ—can also be viewed, to use a term from John Searle's speech-act theory, as a declaration.[23] A declaration is the most powerful type of speech act, since "the successful performance of one of its members brings about the correspondence between the prepositional content [i.e., words] and reality."[24] Here we find a rare bidirectional fit between words and world: the words not only match the state of the world—as is typically the case in any standard utterance, or, as Searle calls it, a representative[25]—indeed, they make it so. As such, "Declarations bring about some alternation in the status or condition of the referred-to object or objects solely in virtue of the fact that the declaration has been successfully performed."[26] However, unlike typical examples in which, for instance, the batter is out the moment that the umpire says, "You're out!" Balak only gradually becomes mad. As Agnon traces out Balak's decent into madness, he regularly thematizes the conflation between signifier and referent inherent in Searle's category of the declaration.[27]

The conflation of signifier and referent first occurs immediately following Yitsḥak's writing on Balak. Balak, a "writing cut loose," as Hoffman puts it,[28] enters the ultrareligious Me'ah She'arim quarter unaware that because of the writing on his body, he will be viewed as both signifier and referent. The Jews of the community, able to read and decode Hebrew, make the connection between the two and flee in panic, immediately concluding that the signifier written upon the potential referent fits. In other words, they believe that the dog upon which it is written "mad dog" must indeed be a mad dog, though this is not (yet) the case. The conflation of signifier and referent is developed at length not long after this scene and suggestively is communicated, however ironically, by Balak himself through an internal monologue:

> He stretched his head toward his back, as he typically did due to fleas. He saw some sort of signs [*simanim*]. He made up his mind that these

> same signs were the handiwork of the owner of that tool. And because his mind was at ease he did not scream and did not make any noise, but instead prolonged this mood and said, all things bad are good. If I had not been driven away from the ritual bath, I would have already bathed and all these signs would have been erased, now that I was driven away from the ritual bath and did not bathe I am likely to know the truth [*ha'emet*]. At this same time, none of his suffering mattered to him compared to his desire for the truth. And again he turned his head back to see what these signs were and what this truth was. But all his efforts were for naught, since he did not know how to read. He was amazed and astonished, come and see everyone who sees me knows the truth that is in me, and me the owner of the truth itself I do not know what it is. He screamed a great and long scream, woof woof woof, this truth what is it?[29]

In this passage, the word "truth" appears a half-dozen times, but as the passage progresses, the meaning or sense of "truth" changes, as does its relation to the words written on Balak. As the passage begins, Balak notices the writing on his body for the first time and is relieved that it has not been erased. "Truth" first appears at the end of this most superficial, visual consideration of the writing on his body, and I suggest that here "truth" refers only to the dog's interest in knowing what is written on him at all. To know the truth here is only to become familiar with the signifiers; the relationship between them and their referents is not yet a consideration. But in the middle of the passage, when Balak looks back at himself a second time, the "signs" and "truth" are mentioned separately and are no longer one and the same. "Truth" now includes not only the signifiers but the referents as well; Balak senses that these "signs" *mean* something, that there is a relationship between signifier and referent. More important, Balak has now assigned truth value to these signifiers; they refer to something that is real and true, that thus exists independent of the signifiers themselves, or perhaps because of the signifiers themselves. Finally, all mention of the "signs" disappears, and Balak comes to understand what is written on him as "the truth."

Over the course of this passage, Balak's efforts to understand the writing on his skin progress from mechanical decoding to signifying to assigning truth value to the "signs." According to Balak, there is, simply put, truth on his body, though he does not know exactly what this truth is. This scene, like so many others in the novel, is replete with irony, and in this particular passage this complex irony is vital to an understanding of the potential dissolution of the distinction between signifier and referent, between language and the outside world that it describes and names. The general comic feel of the scene is a continuation of the absurdity of recent scenes: the image of a dog with writing on his skin, which is now compounded by the presence of the dog's internal monologue. And it is the contents of this internal monologue that create the strongest, most important ironic effect, stemming from the three-way combination of Balak's inability to read this writing, his interpretive effort, and the reader's ability to read what Balak cannot, which in turn qualifies Balak's reading in important ways. Were Balak able to read, he would know that the words on his skin were untrue and that the readings performed by many of the Jews of Jerusalem were in fact misreadings. But because Balak is illiterate and because he naively thinks that the readings of his skin performed in Me'ah She'arim must be accurate, Balak concludes—incorrectly, at this stage of the narrative—that the "signs" (or, more precisely, the signifiers) on his skin must represent some truth. By deciding that these signifiers have truth value, Balak ironically (since the reader knows this while Balak does not) understands himself as both signifier and referent. Moreover, unknowingly understanding himself in this way means, by default, agreeing with the assertion that he is a mad dog.

This slippage is paralleled in the actual language of Balak's monologue, in one of the most seemingly innocent moments in the entire passage: the "in me" (*bi*) in the phrase: "everyone who sees me knows the truth that is *in me,* and me the owner of the truth itself I do not know what it is." Here Balak understands this truth to be literally transparent; those who view him see not only the truth of the external, written signifiers, but see into Balak to make the connection between these signifiers and their referent. The truth is both external and internal, linguistic and bodily. Once again, without knowing it, Balak points toward the breakdown of the distinction between signifier and referent, between what is on him and what is in him, between what is written on his skin and the rest of his physical self.

Furthermore, Balak's effort to describe the precise source and nature of this truth reveals it as elusive and, quite possibly, arbitrary. The truth is "in" him, yet unknown to him; he is the "owner" of this truth but fails to acquire its particular meaning. Still in the earliest stages of the Balak plot, Balak's conflation of signifier and referent creates an ironic effect, as he naively believes everything he reads (or wants to read). As it turns out, Balak's misreading comes to represent the relationship between signifier and referent by the end of the novel.

As the narrative continues, Balak gradually bends to fit the "truth" written on his body: his desperation to know the truth and his suffering at the hands of the Jews of Jerusalem slowly drive him mad. This mad state will, of course, mark Balak's complete, objective transformation into a self-contained signifier/referent pair that culminates when Balak attacks Yitsḥak. Evidence of a move in this direction mounts considerably near the end of a public sermon delivered by Rav Gronem, a local religious leader, whose scathing, nearly apocalyptic sermons overflow with accusations of sin and transgression leveled against the Jewish community as a whole. As Gronem's own virulent speech reaches its peak, he invokes an analogy between the present generation in Jerusalem and a stray dog. He goes on to specify that he does not mean just any stray dog, but that same stray dog upon which it is written "mad dog." Already we encounter a tension between the figurative and literal, as the tenor of Gronem's metaphor, the stray dog, which seemed entirely rhetorical, is suddenly literalized. But his metaphor is not only literalized; his very language—in particular, the signifiers "mad dog"—seems to summon Balak, the referent (Hoffman calls it "the sudden materialization of the text"),[30] as the dog then enters the scene, seemingly upon Gronem's cue:

> Rav Gronem closed his eyes and began to beat in the air and scream, the mad dog, the mad dog. His eyes obtained a strength of their own and were powerfully opened, and stood as two swathed wounds, and gazed in alarm upon the dog. And still Rav Gronem was doubtful about the dog, is he a dog or is he a fantasy. The dog raised himself and showed him his skin, as if to say, if you Rebbi Gronem are doubtful read what is written here. Rav Gronem placed his hands on his eyes and screamed a mighty scream. The mad dog the mad dog.[31]

Balak's appearance following Gronem's invocation of "mad dog" is remarkable for two reasons. First, it clearly encourages the reader to consider once again, ironically or not, Balak as both signifier and referent. Second, as Gronem verbally summons Balak, he appears to perform a declaration, since his words have the power to materialize what they reference. The narrator's interpretation of Balak's gesture toward Rabbi Gronem further underscores the primacy of the signifier, as Balak instructs Gronem to read the writing on his body if he doubts that Balak is the mad dog. Balak, both signifier and referent, proves his status as the mad dog not through any physical demonstration of his madness but by reference to the writing. In this scene—and I suggest that this is the general trajectory of the novel—language, not the reality that it represents or refers to, is often most real.

This primacy of language over its referents is suggested, above all, by Balak's final and complete transformation into a mad dog, as he bends to the creative powers of the declaration that Yitsḥak writes on his skin. This transformation is evident in Balak's physical symptoms during the moments before he delivers his fatal bite: "His mouth filled with foam and his teeth began shaking,"[32] "His mouth began to tremble and his teeth chattered,"[33] and in the act of biting itself: "His teeth stood upright and his whole body swelled. Yitsḥak had only started walking before the dog jumped upon him and stuck his teeth in him and bit him."[34] The Balak plot and the resolution of the narrative as a whole, then, involve not only a dissolution of the border separating signifier and referent but a dissolution marked by the signifier overwhelming the referent. As the signifier overwhelms its referent, the reader also encounters a declaration at work. Yitsḥak's writing on Balak initially seems to be a most powerless and meaningless act, yet his words come to create a condition that did not exist prior to his writing.

Finally, after Yitsḥak has been bitten by Balak and has fallen ill, we witness an instance of, if not exactly a conflation of, an unusual interdependence between signifier and referent. Reb Alter, the *mohel* who performed Yitsḥak's circumcision, learns of Yitsḥak's condition and, upon consulting his *pinkas* (the communal record that he maintains, which lists all those he has circumcised), discovers a blurring of the letters of Yitsḥak's name. The initial inscription of Yitsḥak into Reb Alter's *pinkas* is not for mere administrative purposes; rather, this writing is an example of a Searlean declaration that, along with the actual circumcision itself, brings Yitsḥak into the Jewish community.[35] Subsequently, the blurring of these particular letters, the reversal of this declaration, foreshadows an erasure of sorts of the actual Yitsḥak. Note here how the interdependence of word and thing has taken on an excessive, almost out-of-control quality. The blurring of the letters portends not merely Yitsḥak's exile from the community, but his actual death as well.

Overall, the Balak plot narrates a conflation of signifier and referent, which encourages us to view Yitsḥak's message as a declaration. This section of the narrative travels directly through modernist territory through its focus on language. Such territory has been called "novelistic introversion"[36] or "metalingual scepsis"[37] and includes a larger cluster of gestures that thematize the novel's formal conventions. Such gestures—which often focus on questions of perspective, interpretation, and chronology—complicate the possibility of representing external reality in language. Agnon's experiment in this arena touches on an incredibly fundamental set of "formal" concepts: signification, reference, and the power of language.

Agnon's metalingual plot reflects and relies on more than just a modernist sensibility. Agnon couches his thematization of language—or, more precisely, Hebrew—within the religious communities of the old *Yishuv* of Jerusalem, where a pre-secularized—that is, sacred—view of Hebrew still reigns. Crucial details of the Balak plot permit us to view Yitsḥak's declaration—and the conflation of signifier and referent that it causes—as mirroring specific Hebrew declarations already embedded in either the ritualized, codified function of the language or mystical conceptions of it. With regard to the former function, Agnon first inserts multiple allusions to the practice of excommunication throughout the Balak sections.[38] By encouraging the reader to consider Balak as a strange version of an excommunication (*niddui* or *haḥramah*), Agnon provides a realistic motivation or mechanism explaining the religious community's hostile treatment of Balak. Additionally, numerous historical details of the excommunication episodes alluded to in this section of the novel involve the war over Hebrew, an intense, bitter struggle taking place around the time in which the novel is set.[39]

Remarkably, while pointing toward excommunications as a possible framework for the reception of Yitsḥak's text, Agnon simultaneously alludes to a different strain of pre-secularized Hebrew. Here, through the original Creation story and the model of the golem legend, Agnon suggests the power of a mystical, even magical, Hebrew as the force determining the fate of both Balak and Yitsḥak. I don't believe that it is possible to conclude that just one of these aspects of pre-secularized Hebrew is the sole, true blueprint informing Agnon's construction of the Balak plot. Rather, the unresolved tension between these varied strands of sacred Hebrew serves to intensify the larger tension between secularized Hebrew and sacred Hebrew. I contend that a central axis of the Balak plot is the question of the fate of Hebrew: how—if at all, and at what price—its sacred and even mystical character can be repressed by the project of secularization, and what may happen upon the return or resurfacing of this repression. These issues have received virtually no attention in the writing on *Temol shilshom*[40] and are not only instructive in and of themselves, but can be used to illuminate features of the Balak plot largely ignored by earlier scholarship on this important novel.

EXCOMMUNICATIONS, CREATION, AND THE GOLEM: THE RETURN OF SACRED HEBREW

Agnon situates a return to this earlier view of Hebrew in a community where a sacred, pre-secularized view of Hebrew still reigns. In fact, Agnon seems to rely on the ritualized applications of Hebrew among the ultrareligious of Jerusalem as an important cog in the machine that propels the Jews of Jerusalem to expel Balak from their neighborhoods. Immediately after describing Yitsḥak's apparently nonsensical act of writing, the narrator inserts an aside, introducing previous meetings between dog and writing, in which language is anything but playful:

> When our Rabbis in the Land of Israel would excommunicate a person, they would tie notes to the tails of black dogs, writing on them, So-and-So, son of So-and-So is excommunicated, and they would send them throughout the city to warn the people to stay away from him. But to write on the skin of a dog no man had ever done. But there is nothing new 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 wise man 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.[41]

With this information, Agnon intimates that Yitsḥak may have unknowingly performed—according to Searle[42]—a classic example of a declaration (in this case, an excommunication), one that relies on the extra-linguistic institution of codified Jewish practice. This ritualized use of Hebrew literally casts someone out of the Jewish community. Through this allusion, Agnon places a tension on Yitsḥak's seemingly meaningless and impotent act of arbitrarily writing in a profane Hebrew, as it is echoed by a ritualized use of sacred Hebrew in the performance of a declaration.

Two other references to the practice of excommunication in this portion of the narrative highlight its relevance to the story of Balak as a whole. The first is the fateful nocturnal meeting between the dog and Reb Fayesh, a religious zealot and, as it will turn out, Yitsḥak's future father-in-law. Here excommunications enter the scene through the excommunication notices that Fayesh is posting when the dog stumbles upon him. As Fayesh collapses in the face of Balak's barking, the reader's attention is drawn to the excommunication posters, which are described as joining Balak against Fayesh. They take on agency—both the posters and the words printed upon them—participating in Fayesh's sudden undoing, while Agnon exaggerates as he flaunts the ability of such notices to *do* something: "[The posters] immediately began rolling and striking him in the face. And each and every poster cackles with those words Reb Fayesh wrote on it. . . . He screamed a great scream and ran. The posters ran after him."[43]

The second reference to excommunications immediately follows a passage concerning the public debate over the meaning of Balak. The narrator drifts from a discussion of the debate over Balak to the struggle over Hebrew, also raging at this time:

> Since the Hebrew war was aroused again, the Rabbis of Jerusalem went off on a war for Torah, until all the walls were filled with excommunications . . . to impose a strict and complete ban on all schools in all the cities of the Holy Land that took for themselves as the substance

> of their religion the Hebrew language and the Holy Tongue, and they profane everything holy.[44]

Overall, the repeated proximity of Balak to the practice of excommunication requires the reader to consider Balak as a strange embodiment of this sort of declaration. If we view the text on Balak as a new permutation of the excommunication, one excommunicating the dog himself, the opening trajectory of his plot no longer appears quite so improbable. Rather, what happens to Balak is, in a general sense, "realistic," as the Jews repeatedly cast him out of their community.

Each instance of excommunication draws the reader's attention to the power of sacred Hebrew in a ritualized context. But the three excommunication anecdotes contribute in a second way to Agnon's thematization of Hebrew, as each of them refers to an excommunication motivated by the struggle over the fate of Hebrew in the *Yishuv*. Based solely on the details included in the novel itself, the historical context of the first excommunication that I mentioned above—in which an excommunication had once been written directly upon a dog's skin—remains largely opaque, apparently introduced only since it so closely mirrors Yitsḥak's act of writing on Balak. But its original source has been, like so many other historical allusions in the novel,[45] uncovered by earlier research. According to Aaron Bar-Adon, a social-linguist who has documented Agnon's interest in the revival of Hebrew, the historical event standing behind this anecdote is the excommunication of a Rabbi Akiva Yosef Shlezinger, a religious Jew from the old *Yishuv* who was excommunicated for advocating a program of national revival that included employing Hebrew as a spoken language for everyday purposes.[46] By referring to this particular episode, Agnon compounds the centrality of Hebrew in the opening of the Balak plot. In the Shlezinger episode, we encounter a man excommunicated (in Hebrew) because of his desire to transform Hebrew into a spoken vernacular for everyday, profane purposes.

According to Bar-Adon, the other two excommunication episodes presented above also involve the curious convergence of Balak and the controversy over the revival of Hebrew. Relying on biographical information provided elsewhere in the novel, Bar-Adon suggests that among the many excommunications that Rav Fayesh would post and perhaps was posting during his fateful encounter with Balak were those targeting the new secular schools in the *Yishuv,* schools advocating the use of Hebrew for nonreligious purposes.[47] Later in the novel, discussion of the vast public debate over Balak leads directly into a treatment of various "language wars" of this period.[48] The beginning of the very next section of the chapter, the section in which excommunications are once again introduced, focuses directly on the "Hebrew war" (particularly the debate over employing Hebrew as a vernacular for daily use). Numerous other such references appear throughout the novel, including an instance when Balak runs directly past Ben-Yehuda's home.[49]

In light of *Temol shilshom*'s status as a realist historical novel, we should not be surprised by the attention that Agnon gives to the struggle over Hebrew. The effort to revive Hebrew was a central project of the Zionist movement during this period, on par with the project of reviving Hebrew labor. The final outcome of this struggle (the Language War of 1913) would not only reinforce the centrality of secularized Hebrew for the Zionist movement but would prove to be a watershed for the nationalist project as a whole.[50] On the surface, Agnon's references to the struggle over Hebrew, motivated in part by the great importance of this project during the Second Aliyah, resemble the nearly countless other historical anecdotes throughout the text, all of which play a central role in the novel's realism. At the same time, the clustering of these particular allusions around the Balak plot resonates with, compounds, and adds new dimensions to the thematization of language and Hebrew in this strand of the novel. In other words, these specific historical allusions also pull the text into modernist territory by repeatedly offering additional evidence that the Balak plot is fundamentally "about" Hebrew.

Agnon's repeated placement of excommunications throughout the Balak plot signals his thematization of Hebrew, one revolving around the tension between sacred and profane conceptions of the language. But the particular thrust of *Temol shilshom*'s commentary on the resolution of this tension through the project of secularization can only be fully understood by turning to the second decidedly Hebrew declaration active throughout this section of the narrative. This second declaration emerges through the parallels between the Balak episode, the Creation story, and the golem legend.[51] Like excommunications, both the Creation and the golem story rely on a conception of Hebrew as a sacred language. Yet the power of this second Hebrew declaration to make the world bend to fit words derives not from any extra-linguistic practice or institution, as is the case with excommunications, but rather from a mystical, magical power inherent in the language itself. Such a reading of Balak still interprets Yitsḥak's writing as a declaration, but here the declaration is part of an exceptional subclass, the supernatural, that does not require the existence of any "extra-linguistic institution."[52]

According to Hoffman, this concern with the supernatural character of Hebrew exists elsewhere in Agnon's writings. In her larger project on Agnon, *Between Exile and Return,* Hoffman establishes writing and textuality as central themes and topos of Agnon's "fictive universe."[53] Hoffman suggests that Agnon's fascination with and adoration of the Hebrew sacred text fueled his steady preoccupation with language in his own writings. Most important to our discussion here, Hoffman is quick to note that Agnon's devotion to this textual tradition is driven by the unique ontological status of Hebrew—as a language of truth and presence—in the sacred text:

> To enter Agnon's fictive universe, one must acknowledge the very central place occupied by Torah as the fabric of the world that both contains Creation and binds God to Israel. At the mythic center of Agnon's fictive universe, Torah constitutes a text of presence where word and thing join.[54]

Indeed, Agnon explicitly articulates this conception of Hebrew in his fiction. Consider the story "Ḥush hareaḥ" (Sense of smell), written in 1937, that is, during the period in which Agnon was working on *Temol shilshom.* This story, whose plot comes to describe the magical interface of world and word, opens as follows: "Not like all languages is the holy tongue, for all other languages are nothing but conventional, as nation after nation agreed upon its language, but in the holy tongue was the Torah given and in it the Holy One Blessed be He created the world."[55] While mystical views of Hebrew would become most pronounced during the medieval period, impetus for viewing the language in this way can be located in the opening of the biblical text itself. The third verse of the Torah—"And God said, Let there be light: and there was light"—is, of course, a declaration. In fact, Searle quotes this line as an example of a supernatural declaration.[56] In the fifth verse, language is highlighted again, this time through naming: "And God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night." The Creation story continues in this fashion: something is created through language, and then it is named. In the second chapter, after much of the Creation has already been finished, naming is emphasized once more:

> And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every bird of the air; and brought them to the man to see what he would call them: and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. And the man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. (2:19–20)[57]

Naming, both through sheer repetition and its proximity to actual creation through language, becomes an act of great power and significance.[58] We should take note when Agnon highlights Yitsḥak's act of naming the dog. The narrative, in the instant after Yitsḥak paints *kelev* on the dog, explicitly echoes, however tongue-in-cheek, the biblical scene of the first man naming animals: "[Yitsḥak] patted him on the back and said to him, from now on people [*beriyyot*] won't mistake you, but will know that you're a dog. And even you won't forget that you're a dog."[59] The reader is thus alerted to the Creation scene—in particular, its focus on the potency of language and naming.

Of course, mystical views of Hebrew culminate in the kabbalah and occupy a central position within this theosophy.[60] Gershom Scholem, in his well-known *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism,* remarks that a basic idea informing kabbalistic thinking conceives of the Torah "as a pre-existential being, which preceded everything else in the world."[61] Here this long-standing mystical view of the Hebrew Torah, in which the language enjoys not merely originary ontological status but is the very tool of Creation,[62] tips over into the realm of the magical in statements such as: "The letters of the alphabet—and how much more so those of the divine name or of the entire Torah . . . have secret magical power."[63]

In the golem legend, we find a striking conflation of Creation, naming, Hebrew, and Torah. Several versions of the golem story exist, but all of them, along with their precursor legends and sources (such as the *Sefer yetsirah* [Book of

Creation]), rely on a belief in the magical, creative powers inherent in the Hebrew language. Accordingly, Scholem notes over and over how the act of creating a golem "is a repetition of the creation of Adam,"[64] one that, to quote the Pseudo-Saadia, creates life "by virtue of the power inherent in the recitation of the [Hebrew] letters."[65] In virtually all golem legends, particularly the later and better-known versions, inanimate clay is given life in a ritual involving the writing of the Hebrew word *emet* ("truth") on the creature itself. This obviously echoes the single most conspicuous aspect of Yitsḥak's initial encounter with Balak: his writing on the dog, the act that sets in motion everything that follows. Here the narrative unquestionably parallels the golem legend in the way that Yitsḥak's words, written on the creature, create, or come to create, a new creature. The second main similarity between the story of Balak and certain versions of the golem can be found in the way that both Balak and the golem grow out of control (in Balak's case, this is a matter of growing mad; for the golem, it is actual physical growth) and eventually destroy their creators. This correspondence to the golem story also offers a possible explanation for why Yitsḥak is eventually killed by Balak, something not accounted for in the excommunication model. Likewise the golem model explains why Balak grows insane, rather than merely being cast out of the community, as we might expect from an excommunication. In these ways, the golem legend complements as it responds to some of the questions left unanswered by the excommunication reading, while simultaneously building on the potential of mystical Hebrew as suggested by the Creation story. The golem model offers Agnon the perfect model for reenacting or even retrieving the mystical, supernatural power of Hebrew in the Balak plot, as its intertextual echoes encourage an interpretation in which Balak goes mad because of the power of the Hebrew letters written upon him.

In the introduction to her book on Agnon, Hoffman characterizes his efforts to reimagine a world governed by sacred language as instances of wistful yearning: "There are moments in reading Agnon that suggest a restoration of presence in text and word. The text evokes the horizon of a golden age that it can only point to, so that the reader is made to feel loss, while glimpsing a wholeness that cannot be achieved."[66] Yet in the case of *Temol shilshom*, the "restoration of presence in text and word" evokes not a "golden age" but a nightmare.[67] The tragic outcome of the Balak plot illustrates, to quote Scholem, that "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."[68] Yet Scholem notes that not all tales of the golem end in such deadly fashion, leaving us to ask what led Agnon to the morbid resolution of his narrative.

To understand why Agnon may have represented the union of word and world in *Temol shilshom* in such macabre fashion, we should go back to the recurring use of the return of the repressed as the novel's main means for critiquing the Zionist project. Throughout the narrative, Agnon shows how the Zionists' failure to reinvent Jewish society is characterized by a reversion to the diasporic lifestyle so strongly denounced in their ideology: efforts to find work give way to idle hours at a café; religious practice ceases, but later resumes; a return to the Jewish homeland spawns a longing for home in the Diaspora. In keeping with the historical accuracy of the novel, Agnon similarly addresses the Second Aliyah's project of reviving and secularizing Hebrew. Those previous qualities of Hebrew—its religiously motivated ritualized applications and its mystical, magical power—were forsworn and denied in the name of the project of secularization. Through the Balak plot, Agnon illustrates once more how the repressed, here unknowingly and against the wishes of his protagonist, returns. Viewed thusly, Agnon's performance of the return of a repressed magical Hebrew necessarily forces him to abandon, at least intermittently, the novel's realist mode, since a supernatural language at work upends notions of causality.

Agnon's morbid thematization of Hebrew mirrors the skepticism, concern, and even fear that Scholem expresses in a 1926 letter written to and in honor of the deeply ill Franz Rosenzweig regarding the secularization of Hebrew. Here Scholem passionately expresses his doubts that the Zionists, in their project of secularization, had considered the power of Hebrew, as he warns: "Fraught with danger is the Hebrew language!"[69] Scholem characterizes Hebrew as a language that could turn against its speakers, invoking, to quote William Cutter, "the kabbalistic concept that Hebrew could harbor energies and power in depth not visible to its users."[70] In addition to Agnon's fundamental attachment to a mystical Hebrew, the relevance of this letter to *Temol shilshom* derives first from the fact that Scholem's reservation—along with a widespread concern for Hebrew in general—was voiced by others in the *Yishuv* throughout the preceding two decades, thus overlapping with the time in which Agnon's novel is set.[71] But more particularly, outside of his long relationship with Scholem, Agnon himself contributed a text to this volume and certainly knew of Scholem's letter and of the issues he raised in general.

The role of Hebrew in the Balak plot—when read against Scholem's letter in particular and mystical conceptions of Hebrew in general—illustrates a worst-case scenario for Zionism's project of reviving and secularizing Hebrew. Cutter, in his reading of the Rosenzweig letter, describes Scholem's fear as a double-edged sword of sorts: either its users will be caught off guard by Hebrew's "deeply embedded power," or the project of secularization will simply destroy "the names which must be preserved."[72] The Balak plot realizes this nightmare in reverse. In his initial writing on (and naming of) Balak, Yitsḥak, simply put, demeans Hebrew: he places it upon a dirty stray mutt; he writes out of whimsy, without any intention whatsoever; and what he writes is, to his mind, essentially meaningless. In this opening scene of the Balak story, Hebrew has not merely been secularized; it has been profaned. Yet as the story progress, the repressed quality of the once sacred, magical Hebrew returns with a literal vengeance, climaxing with the now mad dog destroying the writer who—retrospectively, we might say—made the dog mad in the first place.

Likewise, using the model of the return of the repressed, it is possible to explain why the creative power of Hebrew is used to bring about, of all possible conditions, a state of madness in *Temol shilshom.* The transformation of Hebrew into a modern, secular vernacular, along with its subsequent territorialization, was promoted as an important step in the larger Zionist project of Jewish normalization. So central was this facet of the Zionist project that it took on a synecdochal quality, expressed in the switch from the term "Jew" to "Hebrew" in the *Yishuv.* This conflation of language and national subject intensified the saliency of the normalization of the language: the new Hebrew—not the language, but the national subject—of the *Yishuv* was constructed to be active, strong, and healthy, the negative image of the passive, weak, even diseased, stereotypical diasporic Jew.[73] If only indirectly, the sacred character of "diasporic" Hebrew became an additional sign of Jewish abnormality, since Zionism's comprehensive negation of exile stemmed from a fundamental belief in the abnormality—that is, madness—of diasporic life.[74] Through Balak, the effort to defuse and undo—indeed, repress—

this abnormality produces precisely the opposite effect. In this way, Agnon suggests, as he takes the conflation of language and national subject to an extreme, that the process of normalization cannot escape the Jews' linguistic abnormality and that the madness of the recent Jewish past—both crazy and contagious—is more than skin-deep.

Hoffman notes in her reading of both Scholem and Agnon's contributions to the Rosenzweig volume that Scholem's letter attempts to bridge the gap separating two languages—the sacred and the profane—by "fashioning a third that translates one into the other."[75] Agnon's strategy, Hoffman contends, stems from his reliance on the creative space of the literary and, I would add for the sake of precision, the fictional. Here Agnon finds a way to give "form to these conflicts in language, exploring them without necessarily bringing them to a resolution."[76] *Temol shilshom*'s unmistakable and unresolved inner contradictions—its extended, parallel development of, on the one hand, a wide canvas realist narrative, and on the other, a complex and multivalent modernist logic—illustrate the remarkable scale (hundreds of pages, fifteen years of writing) in which Agnon wrote during the construction of this novel. Keeping in mind the conceptual no-man's land positioned between the sacred and the profane, we can begin to understand the intensity of Agnon's attraction to his imaginary laboratory, a place where he could repeatedly investigate and define the contours of this impenetrable void. The impulse to do so must have been unusually acute for Agnon, since among all major Hebrew writers of the pre-State period, few—if any—occupied such a liminal and, I imagine, precarious position between religious observance and self-expression in a mostly secularized Hebrew idiom. Not only was Agnon, at least while writing *Temol shilshom,* a modernist and a realist; he was also a religious Jew participating in the formative movement of the mostly secular—indeed, actively secularizing—Zionist project: modern Hebrew literature. While Bialik, Berdyczewski, Brenner, and many other "founding fathers" of modern Hebrew letters received a traditional religious education, all abandoned religious practice, however much their writing consistently demonstrated knowledge of and engagement with the primary texts of Judaism. Only Agnon eventually returned to religious observance while, perhaps paradoxically, continuing to produce texts within and for a newly secularized Hebrew reading public.

Temol shilshom stands out as perhaps Agnon's most ambitious and all-encompassing experiment ever conducted in his celebrated laboratory of fiction. Here he boldly combines his many contradictory religious, nationalist, and literary affiliations. As each of these associations positions Agnon along distinct points on three largely disparate axes of identity—the spiritual, political, and artistic, respectively—it is no wonder that the novel defied his own prolonged efforts at unification. But more telling than this apparent failure is Agnon's refusal to simplify his project, to defuse the tangle stemming from the radically competing sources of his identity. Some of these sources—the modernist and nationalist—Agnon shared with other Hebrew writers of this period, most notably Y. H. Brenner. But the addition of a religious component deepens the already pronounced tension at the center of other realist-modernist fictions, making Agnon's *Temol shilshom* perhaps the most extreme—and, in a sense, instructive—example of this trend in Hebrew literature.

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NOTES

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1 From a January 28, 1946, letter by Agnon in response to a letter from critic and friend Baruch Kurzweil in which the latter requested some explanation of Balak's significance. Quoted in Dan Laor, *Ḥayyei ʿAgnon: Biyografyah* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 375. All Hebrew translations mine except where noted.

2 In a 1926 letter by Gershom Scholem to and in honor of the deeply ill Franz Rosenzweig regarding the secularization of Hebrew. Quoted in William Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew, Ghastly Speech: Scholem to Rosenzweig, 1926," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 417.

3 *Kelev meshuggaʿ* is not an idiom in Hebrew. The standard term for a mad or rabid dog is *kelev shoteh.* Perhaps in order to prevent confusion in this matter, Barbara Harshav, in her translation of Agnon's *Temol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000]), uses the term "crazy dog." I prefer "mad dog" because it clearly sounds better and, more important, because by the end of the novel (as I will discuss below), Balak becomes a mad—that is, rabid—dog. Incidentally, both words written by Yitsḥak have similar meanings in Yiddish, the dominant spoken language in the old *Yishuv* of Jerusalem, though to the best of my knowledge this is not an idiom in Yiddish, either.

4 Balak is so named some fifteen pages later by a French teacher. This character's knowledge of Hebrew is limited to the alphabet; he doesn't even know to read from right to left. As such, the teacher reads the word *kelev* backward, getting "Balak" (the letter *vet* becoming *bet* at the beginning of a word). In addition, the teacher notes the connection to the biblical Balak, son of Tzippor, king of Moʾav (Num. 22:1–5). Below I will have more to say about this overt allusion and its relevance to the question of language in the novel.

5 Dan Miron, *Harofeh hamedummeh* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 308; Sara Hagar, "Temol Shilshom: Hithavot hamivneh veʾaḥduto," in *Shai ʿAgnon: Meḥkarim utʿudot,* ed. G. Shaked and R. Weiser (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978), 154–56.

6 Small sections of the narrative were published as early as 1931; the first complete edition was published in 1945. For a chronicle of the titles and publication dates for these early sections, see Hagar, "Temol Shilshom," 156.

7 Miron, *Harofeh hamedummeh,* 308. Miron was not the first to make this observation. For references to earlier such critiques, see Hagar, "Temol Shilshom," 156, 174.

8 Perhaps this general confusion remains even after the first glance. Baruch Kurzweil, in a letter to Agnon (part of whose response is found in an epigraph to this article), writes, somewhat desperately, to Agnon: "I've read the book approximately three times and I've made numerous lists. But concerning Balak I'm doubtful." Quoted in Laor, *Ḥayyei ʿAgnon,* 374.

9 Baruch Kurzweil, "ʿAl Balak, hakelev hadimoni," in *Massot ʿal sippurei Shai ʿAgnon* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1975), 104–15; Boaz Arpali, *Rav roman: Ḥamishah maʾamarim ʿal Temol shilshom leShai ʿAgnon* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998), 224–67.

10 Nitza Ben-Dov goes as far as to read the Balak plot as something between an allegory of sorts for Agnon's relationship with his critics and a thematization of the often ridiculous enterprise of literary interpretation in general. While Agnon was cer-

tainly aware of, and likely anticipated, the frustrations that Balak would cause his critics, it seems highly unlikely that he would have given Balak such a central role in the novel, were this his main purpose or meaning. See Nitza Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo meʾusharot: Tiskul eroti, omanut umavet bitsirat ʿAgnon* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), 377–86.

11 For more on Yitsḥak's synecdochal relationship with the collective, see Arpali, *Rav roman,* 165–223.

12 Ibid., 17–18.

13 Meshulam Tochner, *Pesher ʿAgnon* (Jerusalem: Agudat Hasofrim BeYisrael, 1969), 63.

14 Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 443, 447.

15 Amos Oz, *Shetikat hashamayim: ʿAgnon mishtomem ʿal elohim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993), 182.

16 See Aaron Bar-Adon, *Shai ʿAgnon utḥiyyat halashon haʿivrit* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1977), and Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). Arpali briefly mentions Hoffman's work in the context of language, only to discount her general approach in a footnote that—naively, to my mind—discounts the power of artistic representations and, by extension, the very notion of the social construction of reality: "[Artists] are not likely to do anything but embody the truth. . . . As is known, men of action—party workers and ideologues—change life, not artists" (Arpali, *Rav roman,* 262).

17 When viewed within the larger context of the vast amount of criticism on *Temol shilshom,* my research appears remarkably close to Hoffman's, in large part because we both depart radically, but in the same general direction (due to our focus on language), from standard approaches to the novel. But Hoffman's ultimate interest in a psychoanalytic reading of the novel, a reading that centers on Yitsḥak and not Balak, differs considerably from my focus on the novel's historical backdrop and larger questions concerning the Hebrew language.

18 Repression is particularly crucial in Freud's early work, especially that on hysteria. But since the explication of this mechanism is nearly synonymous with Freud's discovery of the unconscious, it crops up everywhere in his writings. Michel de Certeau goes as far as to call the return of the repressed "the process upon which psychoanalysis is based." Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 3. For some of Freud's own writings on repression, see Peter Gay, ed., *The Freud Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 17–18,

557–60, 568–72. For a case study on hysteria in which repression plays a central role, see the "Dora" case, 172–239.

19 See, for instance, Freud's radical history of the emergence of the Jews, *Moses and Monotheism,* in which Moses is eventually murdered in the wilderness, an event subsequently repressed on a collective level. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 85–87, 160–63.

20 De Certeau, *Heterologies,* 4.

21 S. Y. Agnon, *Temol shilshom* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1960), 399.

22 Agnon cleverly underscores that this experience, however complex, is indeed collective, by twice using the root *t-l-sh* (translated as "plucked" in each instance) in this passage. This root makes up the word *talush* ("uprooted"), the well-known term for the prototypical "modern" Jew who has severed ties with home, family, and tradition to pursue a new life as a modern citizen in a European metropolis or to travel to Palestine as a Hebrew *ḥaluts,* or "Zionist pioneer." Agnon's indirect introduction of the *talush* emphasizes the community's continuing sense of homelessness, despite efforts to reject this diasporic condition by creating a new home in the Jewish "homeland" of the *Yishuv.*

23 Within literary studies relying on speech-act theory, J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* is much better known than Searle's work. However, I have elected to use Searle and not Austin for two related reasons. First, Austin's model—in particular, his initial distinction between "constative" and "performative" utterances (between utterances that refer to or describe something versus those that produce or "do" something)—strikes me as ultimately too broad and inexact a distinction. It is perhaps this basic binarism that explains Austin's appeal among deconstructionist scholars such as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, since dismantling binarisms is a central objective of their scholarship. Second, Searle's typology, in addition to trying to refine Austin's research, is a good deal more nuanced, in particular in the area of what he calls "illocutionary acts" (acts in which one states, questions, commands, promises, etc.). My interest lies in various types of "declarations," which is but one category among Searle's five types of illocutionary acts. This category, as I demonstrate below, is remarkably well equipped to describe what the words on Balak "do." For the basic contours of Austin's model, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 1–52. For one study of Austin's work and its treatment in the writings of Derrida and de Man, all within a literary context, see J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001). For a basic introduction to Searle's theory, see John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

24 John R. Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts," *Language in Society* 5 (1976): 13.

25 Ibid., 10.

26 Ibid., 14. In this context, it is worth considering the biblical intertext (Numbers 22–25) suggested by Balak's name. This biblical episode concerns the Moabite king, named Balak, and his futile attempts to enlist the power of the non-Israelite prophet Balaam to prevent the incursion of the wandering Israelites. The story revolves around language and speech acts, including numerous declarations: Balaam, contacted by Balak's envoys, is instructed to curse the Israelites; but he must first speak with God, who forbids Balaam to curse the Israelites, saying that they are blessed. This series of negotiations is repeated, followed by the amazing scene with Balaam's talking donkey and a further instruction by an angel of God to speak only as instructed. Balaam follows these instructions, dramatically blessing the Israelites before Balak himself, who has just instructed Balaam to curse them. Through the end of this episode, Balak cannot prevent Balaam from blessing the Israelites again and again. In short, this episode emphasizes not just language in general, but its power, in what seems to be an extended treatment of speech acts, especially declarations. The action consists of numerous negotiations where deals are struck and conditions established: between Balak's men and Balaam, between Balaam and God, between Balaam and Balak himself. The episode as a whole revolves around blessings and curses, striking examples of declarations. Balak seeks out Balaam to counter verbally the daunting physical might of the encroaching Israelites, investing in the lone prophet his hope that Balaam's words will turn them back, that the world will come to "fit" his words. As the story progresses, Balaam is revealed to be little more than God's mouthpiece. He possesses no agency when it comes to his blessing and curses, since "what the Lord speaks," he "must do" (23:26), as God once more illustrates His absolute mastery of performing declarations. All the same, Balaam's blessings seem to possess the stuff of true prophecy, forecasting with certainty the Israelites' impending conquest of the entire region. Agnon's not-so-subtle allusion to the story of Balak—which is made scores of times throughout the novel—intensifies the novel's thematization of language by directing us to an intertext bursting with related concerns.

27 In her treatment of the role of writing in the Balak plot and in the novel as a whole, Hoffman, too, discusses the matter of signification when she writes that "the novel records that effort to stabilize the process of signification and anchor reality in the sign." Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return,* 134. Hoffman's fundamentally psychoanalytic approach leads her to refer to the writing on Balak as an "inscription," which, as she notes, "carries the sense of a formative writing and has been used as a metaphor for the formation of the unconscious" (13). By positioning the writing

on Balak in this fashion, Hoffman sets the stage for an oedipal reading of Agnon's novel as a bildungsroman that focuses on "the ironies generated by the failure of the subject to 'develop,' that is, to go through the sort of *Bildung* we might expect" (126).

28 Ibid., 129.

29 Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 291.

30 Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return,* 130.

31 The narrator, in the spirit of literalizing the figurative, introduces this passage—and Balak—with a striking literalization of the idiom normally used to indicate the literalization of a metaphor: "And they still did not know that the same analogy, the face of the generation is like the face of a dog, had put on skin and bones and worn flesh" (Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 587). Hoffman notes the use of this idiom as well, *Between Exile and Return,* 130.

32 Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 592.

33 Ibid., 593.

34 Ibid., 595.

35 Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return,* 144.

36 John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury, "The Introverted Novel," in *Modernism,* ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin, 1991), 394–415.

37 Douwe Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1984), 17.

38 Hoffman pays close attention to the presence of excommunications in the Balak plot. In contrast to my reading, however, Hoffman sees Balak himself not so much as an excommunication himself (much less a Searlean declaration) than as a textual force of sorts that "violates authorized usages of writing" by those who attempt to "anchor meaning in a text"—in this instance, through excommunications. For Hoffman's treatment of excommunications, see Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return,* 131–32.

39 This is not to be confused with the so-called Language Wars of 1913, which broke out over the question of whether Hebrew would become the standard language of instruction in the new *Yishuv* (German was the main alternative, especially in technical subjects). Though the Language Wars occurred during the Second Aliyah, and thus around the time *Temol shilshom* takes place, Agnon's narrative likely ends by 1910. Nevertheless, the conflicts that would come to a head in 1913 were already evident during the time of the novel. Moreover, additional, related

struggles involving Hebrew were going on at this time, including conflicts between advocates of adopting Hebrew as a vernacular and religious Jews vehemently opposed to its secularization. For more on these issues in Agnon's writing (some of which will be discussed below), see Bar-Adon, *Shai ʿAgnon utḥiyyat halashon haʿivrit,* 14, 62, 64, 156–61.

40 Hoffman notes in her book's introduction that "Agnon's writing responds to the question of secularization of a sacred tongue," though her chapter on *Temol shilshom* largely ignores this topic in favor of its focus on the novel's complex oedipal framework. See Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return,* 4.

41 Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 276.

42 Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts," 15.

43 Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 311.

44 Ibid., 461.

45 The most striking example of this type of research is that by Avraham Holtz. Calling the novel an example of "documentary fiction," Holtz's work on *Temol shilshom* is dedicated to locating and reproducing the sources of many of Agnon's anecdotes and descriptions, which Holtz finds in newspapers, diaries, journals, and speeches from the era. Holtz's research is so exclusively historical that he describes his work as "non-interpretive" and suggestively notes that "the last section [of the novel; i.e., the Balak story or Yitsḥak's reunion with the dog] is not in the interest of this research and requires a separate study" (178). The affinity between the original sources and their reproductions in the novel is often unmistakable and suggests that in many cases, Agnon did in fact work from such sources. Avraham Holtz, "Hitbonenut bifratei 'temol shilshom,'" in *Kovets ʿAgnon,* ed. Emunah Yaron et al. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1994).

46 Bar-Adon, *Shai ʿAgnon utḥiyyat halashon haʿivrit,* 156–57. Outside of the congruence of the historical event to Agnon's anecdote, Bar-Adon also notes that Shlezinger is alluded to elsewhere in *Temol shilshom* (156; see Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 486–87). For a summary in English of Bar-Adon's research on Agnon and the revival of Hebrew, see Aaron Bar-Adon, "S. Y. Agnon and the Revival of Modern Hebrew," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language: A Journal of the Humanities* 14 (1973): 147–75.

47 Bar-Adon, *Shai ʿAgnon utḥiyyat halashon haʿivrit,* 158; Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 315–16.

48 Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 461.

49 Bar-Adon, *Shai ʿAgnon utḥiyyat halashon haʿivrit,* 62,161; Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 158, 290, 459. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda is, of course, often called the "father" of modern Hebrew. It is now fairly well accepted that his role in, if not dedication to, the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language is often overstated. Agnon himself took issue with the Ben-Yehuda legend, viewing him with a certain degree of derision, as evidenced by unflattering references him to in *Temol shilshom* and other stories. See Bar-Adon, *Shai ʿAgnon utḥiyyat halashon haʿivrit,* 93–127. In general, Bar-Adon views *Temol shilshom* as a veritable history of (and, indeed, a novel first and foremost about) the revival of Hebrew during the Second Aliyah, as it engages everything from questions of pronunciation to official and unofficial policies regarding the Hebrew revival at this time. See Bar-Adon, *Shai ʿAgnon utḥiyyat halashon haʿivrit,* 58–92.

50 Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 80.

51 When I speak of "the golem legend," I do not mean to imply the existence of a single story. Though typically associated with the medieval period, the golem legend—at least, precursor elements of it—is approximately two thousand years old. The remarkably complex history of this tradition finds the rituals, techniques, and objectives linked to creating golems constantly evolving, however much certain basic features remain present, in particular the central role of language. For a historical survey of the golem legend from the ancient period up and through Scholem's time, see Moshe Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

52 Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts," 15.

53 Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return,* 5.

54 Ibid.

55 S. Y. Agnon, "Ḥush hareaḥ," in *Elu vaʾelu* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998), 237. For Hoffman's reading of this story, see Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return,* 115–22.

56 Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts," 15.

57 Translation taken from *The Jerusalem Bible* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1992), 2–3.

58 Gen. Rabbah 17:4 develops this relationship between naming and power or naming and status explicitly. Here God appears to raise Adam above the ministering angels, by telling them that Adam's wisdom will exceed theirs and demonstrating this by allowing Adam to name the creatures of the earth. Later on, God allows Adam to name both himself and God, though in naming God Adam also men-

tions that God's name, *adonai* (Lord), marks His mastery over all "His creatures." My thanks to Gwynn Kessler for her assistance with this and other rabbinic texts.

59 Agnon, *Temol shilshom,* 276.

60 For a survey of conceptions of Hebrew in Jewish mysticism—all of which, in one way or another, stress the unique ontological potency of the language and its letters—see Moshe Idel, "Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Language,* ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42–79.

61 Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 41.

62 In this context, Hoffman notes Gen. Rabbah 1:1, which states that God consulted the Torah for the blueprint of Creation, 105.

63 Scholem, *On the Kabbalah,* 166.

64 Ibid., 179. Here, too, it is possible to locate the earlier sources of these connections. In Gen. Rabbah 8:1, Adam is described as *golem* in the moment of his creation, as a "lifeless mass [*golem*] extending from one end of the world to the other."

65 Scholem, *On the Kabbalah,* 186.

66 Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return,* 5.

67 In her chapter on *Temol shilshom,* Hoffman does not address these earlier observations concerning the loss of a world governed by a sacred language of presence.

68 Scholem, *On the Kabbalah,* 190–91.

69 See n. 2 above.

70 Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew," 418.

71 Cutter refers to the mid-twenties as a "a period of great anxiety in Eretz Yisrael about the destiny of the Hebrew language . . . [this] one decade after an immensely rich period of writing about Hebrew, language in general, and artistic expression through language" (420). Of the many essays written about Hebrew and language in general by Bialik, Brenner, Berdyczewski, and others during the first two decades of the century, Bialik's powerful "Gillui vekhissui belashon" (Revealment and concealment in language), by way of contrast, is the most interesting in this context. Bialik, as Robert Alter aptly puts it, describes a "negative kabbalah." Rather than imagining language as an inexhaustible abundance, Bialik conceives of it as an equally absolute void. See Robert Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature* (West Orange, N.J.: Behrman House, 1975), 128–29. For a list of influential essays on

Hebrew and language from this period, see Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew," 432. For Bialik's essay, see Ḥ. N. Bialik, *Kol kitvei* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1961), 207–9.

72 Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew," 418, 428. In keeping with the linguistic tradition he so valued, Scholem expressed a deep concern for naming, as the potent essence of language. In his letter, he writes: "Language is Name. In the name rests the power of language, its abyss is sealed with the name. We have no right to conjure up the old names day by day without calling forward their hidden power." Interestingly, Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin had come to similar conclusions about the central role of naming in language, though they each arrived at this point after traveling down different philosophical paths.

73 For more on the internalization of antisemitic stereotypes in the *Yishuv,* see Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots,* 19–20, and Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 76–78.

74 Along these lines, Cutter remarks how Scholem feared the flattening effects of Zionism's normalizing project: "The remedy of Zionism, which is to create a 'normalized' nation, involves losing some abnormal qualities of Jewish experience which are its strength" (Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew," 419).

75 Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return,* 180.

76 Ibid.