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Topographies of Reading: Agnon through Benjamin

ANNE GOLOMB HOFFMAN

But just as the sleeper—in this respect like the madman—sets out on the macrocosmic journey through his body, and the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensation (which for the waking and salubrious individual converge in a steady surge of health) generate, in the extravagantly heightened inner awareness of the sleeper, illusion or dream imagery which translates and accounts for them, so likewise for the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides. We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century—in fashion and advertising, in buildings and politics—as the outcome of its dream visions.

— WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*¹

THE DREAMING COLLECTIVE FINDS in urban spectacles the distorted reflection of its own inwardness. Elsewhere, reflecting on his own urban childhood, Benjamin suggests that the objects and settings he recalls have preserved within them the capacity to recognize him.² The Berlin of his childhood contains within it the disguised record of experiences that continue to work their effects in him, unrecognized by consciousness except for chance encounters in which they may find brief exposure. It is in this light, Benjamin tells us, that he'd like to map his life onto the city, producing an urban topography whose contours reflect the encounters that are his life story.

Taking Benjamin's urban map into the domain of reading, I suggest we think of our encounters with texts as topographies of reading. The text is a terrain that is there to be mapped by (and in) the reader. If one were to map one's reading onto the text, one would find the contours of the map to be shaped by the particular emphases of one's reading. High points and low points, hidden spaces: the tactile record of an encounter with the text. The text comes alive in that interaction and so do we. Idiosyncratic as one's individual map might be, the general terrain of the text remains visible and recognizable in it. I propose to revisit several novels of S. Y. Agnon through an encounter with Walter Benjamin, giving space along the way to some reflections on reading. Benjamin's wish to map a life onto the urban terrain of Berlin or Paris allows for recognition of the particular city, while highlighting the distinctive markers of an individual life journey. So, too, might we trace the markers of an individual reading, holding on, all the while, to a more general sense of the text.

How do we read? What purposes does reading serve? Running into difficulty with reading may cause one to consider the conditions that define an activity one might otherwise take for granted. For me, this happened a few years ago after an experience of abdominal surgery. Only gradually did I realize the connection between experience of the text and of my body, between reading and inhabiting myself. Finding myself in a tense exile from my own body, I realized gradually that this relegation to the outside had affected my capacity to read as well. I could not reenter the text, try as I might. Reflection, associative play, hard work, all have gone into an as yet uncompleted effort to regain entry. The present essay forms part of that effort.

Images of text and body, a central topic in my 1991 book on Agnon, have long engaged my interest.³ I am motivated by curiosity about structures in the text, spaces one enters and explores in reading, spaces that are both foreign and familiar. In his essay "Unpacking My Library," Walter Benjamin describes the collector as a "physiognomist of the world of objects."⁴ So, too, the reader or critic figures as a physiognomist of texts, one who acquires, possesses, and comes to know a text from the inside, as well as from the outside. The record of that encounter can be found in the act of criticism. Consider literary criticism, then, as a physiognomy of the text, carried out from the perspective of the reader's engagement with it. The text invites

the reader into a space where action occurs. That action is constituted in the reader out of the text. The critic as reader works to articulate the conditions and to map the terrain of reading.

Benjamin uses the metaphor of “physiognomy” to convey the intensity of the collector’s absorption in the object; I take the image fully in that sense and understand it to include the reader as collector. In this sense of a physiognomy of reading, the reader’s absorption in the text opens the risk of encounter with bodies that can be known.

In asking what happens when we read, I find myself thinking of the reader as a type of flâneur, the urban stroller of a century ago, pausing at the windows of the morgue, behind whose large glass surfaces an array of corpses lies in full display. What do we do for entertainment? We read, we look, we attempt to know, to identify and explore the bodies that are, in fact, our own. In his readings of nineteenth-century material culture, Benjamin expresses particular interest in the collective response to spectacles, such as the panorama, which brought larger landscapes or historical scenes into an urban enclosure; the arcade, a commercial site that mingled public and private space; and, we might add, the morgue, which (as Vanessa Schwartz has noted) figured as a free attraction in nineteenth-century Paris, receiving on occasion as many as forty thousand visitors a day.⁵ The crowd’s fascinated absorption in spectacles appears to Benjamin as a form of dreamlike expression, offering disguised and distorted images of who we are, to ourselves, in the world. Thus, Benjamin approaches the dreaming collective, whose wanderings in arcades and passages he understands as absorption “in its own inwardness.”

So, too, might we think of the book as our dream.

Reading offers the chance of an encounter that, as in dreaming, we may experience without full recognition. This sense of an encounter with an object that is reciprocal, yet only partially understood, draws Benjamin and forms a central concern in his writing. In an essay on Baudelaire, he writes: “To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.”⁶ So, too, recalling his childhood in Berlin, Benjamin speaks of a “stairway interior, which has conserved in seclusion the power to recognize me.”⁷ Objects acquire active presence, as they reach out to the passerby. What does this mean?

Benjamin writes against mastery. The urban wanderings of the *flâneur* retain something of the early incompetence of the child—the lack of mastery that leaves one open to the shock of an unexpected encounter. His sense of connection to the urban scene allows for, even treasures, a certain indirection, an ability to relinquish the direction of consciousness. From this comes the capacity of the urban scene to surprise. Objects, locations, urban debris, constitute for Benjamin a veil behind which significant figures, lost to consciousness, may be discerned. It is in just this sense that I understand what Benjamin means by letting the object see me: an opening to the world, a mutuality with the “object,” out of which comes a knowing that never exhausts the object completely.

Thus for Baudelaire, the poem emerges out of the shock of an urban encounter that comprises moments from both past and present. In Baudelaire’s metaphors, Benjamin finds renditions of experience so powerful that the poet does not even need to name the actuality of the crowd on the street, so enveloped are we in the metaphor, the experience in language of that crowd.

In a gesture that marks the text as potential territory one might explore in oneself, Benjamin portrays two different kinds of relationship to the text in terms of the contrast between flying over a terrain in an airplane, on the one hand, and exploring it on the ground, feeling one’s way around and through its contours and textures, on the other.⁸ This tactile absorption in the language of the text “commands the soul,” he tells us, making available “new aspects of [one’s] inner self that are opened by the text, that road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it.” Benjamin finds a clarifying violence in the potential of the text to take one in and to surprise: the shock of recognition at the encounter with a passage in a book that is both foreign and one’s own.

Thus Benjamin helps us in understanding reading as an encounter in language with a text that is both strange and familiar: “Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.”⁹ In reading, understood as an archaeology of the text, one digs into terrain that is not manifestly one’s own and yet in which one has a personal stake.

Why read, then? In order to not know, I want to say, in order to preserve the trace of experience, unknown, within oneself. The shock of recognition one experiences in reading does not require full acknowledgment; its incompleteness is guaranteed by the very otherness of the text. The act of criticism, then, is one reader's gesture of recognition, offered to others as evidence of an encounter with the strangeness and the familiarity of the text. Criticism exposes the uncanny of reading.

What might Benjamin have to tell us about reading Agnon? And, in turn, what does Agnon have to tell us about reading? Agnon and Benjamin knew each other in Berlin, where Gershom Scholem, well acquainted with both, read aloud to Benjamin a German translation of "Agadat hasofer" (The Tale of a Scribe) and recorded Benjamin's acknowledgment of the story's importance.¹⁰ Agnon, of course, made his way back from Germany to Palestine in the late twenties, while Benjamin resisted Scholem's repeated invitations to join him in Jerusalem. Fleeing Paris as the Germans approached in 1940, Benjamin took his own life at the Spanish border in the Pyrenees. The novels of Agnon's that I wish to consider here were composed after the war and the destruction of European Jewry. They testify thus to Agnon's survival, both in the dates of their composition and in their settings, which take in the struggle to establish a Jewish homeland, terrain that Benjamin never did encounter. I bring Benjamin into my reading of Agnon in order to illuminate the paths they share and to understand better the scenes of reading that I find in the text and in myself.

The project of nineteenth-century realism was to produce an illusion of referentiality—to capture nature, in a gesture toward the object that would efface its own artifice. In our own time, the emphasis has shifted to examining the means by which such illusions, impressions of the real, are produced. Agnon enacts a variant of this modernist shift on the terrain of Hebrew fiction that he marked out for himself—profane worlds, rendered in a tongue that is steeped in allusion to traditional Jewish sources. He practices an art of exposure that makes visible to the reader, with seeming artlessness, the linguistic materials out of which the fiction is crafted. Agnon's novels draw to the reader's attention the modes of seeing employed by his characters, as well as the objects to which they respond, but he leaves it to the

reader to notice parallels and patterns and to pull them together. This is his famed posture of naïveté, as a storyteller. Agnon's playful neutrality thus opens up a space in which the reader becomes active and may find the opportunity to reflect on the patterns of her own inquiry.

Tmol shilshom (Only Yesterday) and *Shirah* can be mapped on a terrain of reading that belongs not only to the reader's experience, but to the world of the fiction as well.¹¹ *Tmol shilshom* gives us Yitzhak Kummer, opaque to himself, a young man on the stage of history. His random act of writing on a dog's back produces an inscription whose effects are as catastrophic as they are unpremeditated. On an impulse, Yitzhak paints the words "mad dog" on the back of a stray mutt. In doing so, he sets into motion a chain of events that ultimately take his life. He is bitten by the dog, which seeks to understand the writing on its back and thus to penetrate the mystery that has been plaguing it. The chance encounter between Yitzhak and the dog Balak yields disastrous outcomes that seem virtually a measure of that young man's inattentiveness: his action produces consequences he can neither control nor assimilate. The dog is transgressive: it crosses borders, seeking understanding. Yitzhak, however, remains the unwitting agent of his own catastrophic fate. Ever more blindly, Yitzhak goes further inside the ultra-pious world of Me'ah She'arim, seeking the stern authority of the fathers. In Yitzhak's penetration of that world, he acts out his desire for self-immolation at the hands of the father.

Immediately after the completion of *Tmol shilshom*, Agnon began work on *Shirah*, a novel that remained unfinished, but was published posthumously, in accordance with his instructions. In contrast to *Tmol shilshom's* Yitzhak, the main character of *Shirah* is Manfred Herbst, a German Jewish academic living in Jerusalem, whose scholarly activities have dulled and deadened. Herbst's oppressive self-consciousness keeps him within the tight limits of existing texts and allows him no more than the self-limiting inhibitions of parody. Herbst seeks an access to experience in the text and in the body.

Both of these large and capacious novels take up issues of relationship to body and text. If we think about the encounters in and with language that are to be found in both, we can say that the actions of Yitzhak, of the dog Balak, and of Herbst map out divergent positions in the terrain of experience that is reading. Yitzhak, the non-reader of his own experience, writes on the dog's back and thus produces Balak, the

text in search of a reader. The mixture of affectionate recognition and scholarly self-hatred that tinges the portrait of Manfred Herbst, in contrast, belongs to the world of the library, the *Bibliothek*, in which the book assumes pride of place as the instinctualized object.

Through overflowing anecdotes of bibliophilic excess, *Shirah* offers portraits of displaced German Jews in Jerusalem, conveying a sense of their lingering identification with a culture that has condemned them as its diseased other. The bibliophilia that Agnon takes as subject in *Shirah* can be understood through a reading of Walter Benjamin, particularly of his sense of the collector as a physiognomist of objects. Thus, for example, Herbst stands in a Jerusalem bookstore and observes a woman who has come to check on the disposition of the object she has left on consignment—an antique reliquary that holds an original Mendelssohn manuscript. Agnon delineates the history of ownership of the reliquary and of shifts and changes in its contents and use, a history that takes in all its transfers from Gentile to Jew, and includes the conversions and returns to Judaism of its Jewish owners. The object speaks: the reliquary communicates its history in the narrative, in a language Walter Benjamin would have understood.

So, too, in a back room of that bookstore, Herbst browses through books and feels their heft in his hand. He knows their histories through his fingertips, as he exercises the cumulative sensibility of the bibliophile, transplanted from Europe to the byways of Jerusalem. Objects speak in *Shirah* with the voice of history. Agnon unpacks Walter Benjamin's library in the heart of Jerusalem, missing none of the contradictions that mark the objects; his narrative is suffused with the passionate allegiances, the affiliations, and encounters, as well as the absences and effacements of Germany's Jews.

As he pursues the elusive Shirah, the nurse whose name forms the title of the novel, Herbst finds himself increasingly drawn to the arena of the body, specifically to the opening of the body, through wound and disease. Herbst tries to write a tragedy, in which the only character of his own invention is a leper. Through encounters with texts, Herbst seeks to retrieve the shock of encounter with the body. Thus, we see him riveted before a book, open to a color print that shows a leper, whose extended hand, holding a bell to warn passersby of contagion, has been eaten away by the disease. The picture draws Herbst into a body whose surface has been

eroded by disease and thus opened to the eyes of the viewer. Herbst is greedy for such encounters, through which he might recover some sense of life in the body. One might say that Herbst seeks what Yitzhak stumbles upon without knowing, a sense of the interpenetration of body and text.

Walter Benjamin reflects on the full spectrum of what he calls “traumatophile” types, those who seek out repeated shocks of encounter. He considers the traumatic war neuroses that Freud takes up in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cases in which the incapacity to assimilate and process the violence of experience causes illness. Benjamin reflects also on the artist’s experience, in which the shock of encounter finds expression, if not resolution, in the production of the work of art. Benjamin identifies the encounter that is central to all these experiences and recognizes the violence of the shock, along with the varying capacities of organisms to absorb the shock.¹²

Metaphor registers the shock of encounter. In the violence of the shock, words become things. And I? Always a reader, maintaining myself in the tension between knowing and not knowing. My own gradual and difficult return to reading involves renewed access to metaphorical thinking, to the mobility of images. The scene of reading is the locus of excitement in the body, a permeable text that opens to experience.

Reflecting on shocks that one can master and shocks by which one is overcome, I find myself thinking of Agnon’s World War I novella, *Ad benah* (Until now), where we find the mute figure of a soldier who is referred to as the *golem ish* (the golem man). Within the structure of the novella, this shell-shocked soldier serves as something of a mute double for the very voluble narrator.¹³ In *Ad benah*, this narrator, Agnon’s fictional persona, wanders through the contorted landscape of wartime Germany. The very volubility of this first-person narrator renders him an ironic figure, one whose unceasing efforts at commentary make evident the inadequacy of words to the phenomena that they attempt to grasp and thus to control. The narrator gives us access to grotesque images and encounters, which he describes at length but fails to integrate or comprehend. These images of truncated bodies and body parts derive much of their power from the bodily investment of German Jews in the *Vaterland* and convey the crisis in German Jewish identity, on

the level of the body. Within this texture of bodies and body parts, no image is more powerful than the *golem ish*, whose mute presence conveys a sense of the impotence or mute witness of the writer. The *golem ish* thus marks the unassimilable excess that is the trauma of history.

In *Tmol shilshom*, Yitzhak Kummer is overcome ultimately by a force he cannot master: a force unleashed by his own thoughtless act of writing on the dog. Just as the dog Balak terrifies the inhabitants of Jerusalem's ultra-pious Me'ah She'arim community and topples two of its most fearsome rabbinic authorities, so, too, Balak returns ultimately to Yitzhak and bites him in an effort to decode the writing on its back, to drink in the truth in Yitzhak's blood. For all their grim comedy, these catastrophic encounters produce no illumination. The mute figure of the writer, acknowledged in the *golem ish* of *Ad henah*, finds expression also in the passive witness of Yitzhak to his own unthinking act. Agnon marks the dull face of a stupidity that is his own position on the stage of history. I am calling "stupidity" that very capacity of the writer to take in more than he can absorb. In that troubling excess, the text makes available to its readers an uncanny mirroring of our own bodily incoherence: the register of experiences to which we may not have access, but that persist in us nevertheless.

Novelistic moments such as these thus acquire added force through echoes of early encounters, experiences of the body, through which a sense of self begins to take shape. The body is at stake in these encounters: the body as the photographic film that responds to the magnesium explosion of encounter. This is Benjamin's reference to the photographic process, in which a sensitive medium is exposed to an explosive burst of light. And yet the burst of light that Benjamin fastens upon in this image of photography serves to expose an image from an *earlier* era: "Nor is this very mysterious," he writes, since at such moments, "our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by the shock, as is the little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match. It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images."¹⁴ Benjamin puts emphasis on that earlier exposure of the film in a half light that is inadequate for registering the image. Only later, with a flash of light from another source, does the original image become visible. Benjamin's photographic analogy conveys a full sense of the workings of deferred

action. Deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) is a concept central to the understanding of psychical causality and temporality; it highlights particularly the “deferred revision” of material that the organism was unable to assimilate in the first place.¹⁵

Far from any simple notion of psychic determinism, deferred action draws our attention to the complex patterns through which past events, unassimilable at the time, continue to make their effects felt in an ongoing present. That ongoing present includes the time of reading. In the duration of reading, a text makes available to the reader moments (events) in her own past that are disguised and distorted by virtue of their appearance in a text that is other to one’s self. So, too, the flâneurs, urban strollers past and present, could dream themselves in the spectacles they encountered, without any compulsion to complete the act of recognition.

How do we see ourselves and how do we read? Consider the sense of self that derives from experiences of the body: I refer to Freud’s observation that the first ego is a bodily ego, supplemented by Lacan’s insistence on the otherness of those early images of self in which we find identity. The experience of self that is never without a certain otherness enters into an experience of reading in which one feels the text to be one’s own and yet other. Looking into the text figures thus as an exploration of inner life and a subterranean history of the body. The text as a body—an entity that is conjectured, but never simply there to be known. Reading stages the spectacle of the self, without one’s having to recognize it for what it is. We can read instead of knowing. But reading is a kind of knowing.

In *Shirah*, these interests may be felt in Herbst’s attraction to the wound as the site of the opening of the body: he is drawn to the opening of the body as the locus of meaning. *Shirah*’s sense of a porous or permeable text finds its opposite in the Me’ah She’arim of *Tmol shilshom*, a world in which rabbinic prohibitions and writs of excommunication are tied to the tails of dogs, and bodies are perceived as impermeable surfaces, texts with hard edges. These novels offer divergent spectacles of the body, in which the relationship of the body to the law becomes visible. We are made to see the regulation of bodies through laws that establish boundaries, regulate openings, define gender and propriety. We are given to see bodies that defy regulation in their exposure of what might otherwise remain hidden.

Fiction as a diorama: the writer creates a universe. In that diorama, a scene is staged. In that scene, objects. Reading can work to give expression to curiosity, a

curiosity that finds no expression otherwise, whose expression was long ago forbidden. That disavowed curiosity can lead the attention of both writer and reader to stray from the manifest direction of a story line, betraying an interest and excitement that belong to the child's early inquiries into bodily mysteries. The text and the reader give place to these disavowed interests, restaging early dramas of sexual curiosity, even as we focus our attention elsewhere in our reading.

Of particular interest in this respect are the comments of the art critic Hal Foster on the work of contemporary artist Robert Gober. Foster views Gober's dioramas as staging traumas of selfhood and makes the historical connection to the diorama, as a popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth century. Of Gober's art, Foster writes: "This ambivalence of active and passive roles is performed in visual terms: both an active seeing and a passive being-seen are in play here, and they meet in a reflexive seeing oneself. . . . [O]ne has the strange sense of seeing oneself, of revisiting the crime that is oneself."¹⁶

Foster takes into account what the "encounter" might have been for the artist and what it is like for the viewer. I make a connection here to Benjamin, who writes about creativity as the repetition of trauma. Additionally, Foster's emphasis on the enigmatic quality of the artist's work underscores the necessary tension between what can be said and what must be left unspoken. (His insistence on the importance of both is central to his conception of art criticism.) That tension in the work allows the reader to enter its world and make it her own, just as the spatial image of the text as a panorama offers a number of possible positions to the reader, from passive to active.

Reading Benjamin with Foster leads me to think about the absorption of nineteenth-century spectators in the "panorama": spectators enter a cylindrical structure housing the display and thus are absorbed into the spectacle, while remaining observers. Foster perceives the connection between Gober's contemporary dioramas and the popular entertainment of a century ago, the diorama as "a scenographic re-creation of an historical event or a natural habitat; part painting, part theater, it brought battle scenes to civilians or exotic wilds to industrial metropolises. Closer to peep shows than to pictures, the diorama was loved by the masses but scorned by the cultivated as a vulgar device of illusion. Often the tableaux included actual things, but in the service of *illusion*, an illusion more real than a

framed image: a hyperrealism that borders on the hallucinated or the fantasmatic” (130). Following Benjamin and Foster, I am drawn to thinking of these forms of mass entertainment of an earlier era as renditions of private experience in the public arena.

In this light, contemporary inquiries into earlier forms of mass culture offer us insight into scenes of reading, rendered on the level of spectacle. Many readers approach a text; what each finds is shaped not only by what is there, but by unrecognized processes within each “viewer,” interactions in which subject and object mingle.

Panorama and spectacle: going to visit the morgue in nineteenth-century Paris, strolling by and gazing at the corpses on display. In this context, as well, we might reflect on the nineteenth-century practice of photographing the dead, “corpsing the image,” as Peter Schwenger puts it in a recent essay in *Critical Inquiry*. He argues that the custom exposes to view (to our eyes, at least) that aspect of an image that might otherwise remain hidden: the simultaneity of coherence and of fragmentation in it, rather than simply the illusion of bodily integrity that is mirrored and thus confirmed in the coherence of the image. We are, he puts it, “embodied subjects—who continually forget that the state of these images is also our own.”¹⁷ These are all suggestive portrayals of spectatorship, each delineating the position from which the viewer responds to what she sees. Consider the text as a panorama that is the interior of one’s own body, reading as the opportunity to explore what is otherwise forbidden territory, the territory of knowing that body.

It is interesting to note that Agnon had difficulty in finishing each of these novels. Each resists the closure toward which it moves. Consider the text as an uncanny diorama that will always exceed our efforts to know it and thus ourselves. Agnon performs dioramas of history in his novels, but history with a difference: the inner life of public events, histories both visible and hidden. Spectacles function as narrative dioramas in each. In *Tmol shilshom*, writing goes against a paternal sanction, breaking loose from within that powerful taboo, in an act that can only be performed blindly. *Tmol shilshom* offers a cataclysmic shattering produced by a careless writing, which is transgressive perhaps simply in the unknowingness—the opacity of its subject to himself. In *Shirab*, the scene of the opening of the body, the severing of body part, draws Herbst, the reluctant yet excited observer, out of his

study and into a world of suffering in the body. *Shirah* takes in a vast anatomical theater that contains the plight of German Jewry in the 1940s, but addresses as well the yearning of its central character to reopen and reenter the arena of the body, a zone of action to which he has lost access.

The trauma (unassimilable excess) of surgery produced a “resolution” in me of closure, that is, a deadening of feeling at the site of the wound. No feeling (or too much) at the locus of the incision. In writing about culture’s move toward transcendence of the body, and about gender as the classification of positions in relation to an “archaic” body, I was reiterating the very polarization I might have been seeking to deconstruct. That is, I was not questioning the alignment of masculine and feminine with closing and opening the body, impermeability and permeability. As productive as my account of these two novels may have been in uncovering these linkages, rich associations in the structure of the text, I think my vision failed to take in a “beyond” or “before” of gender, coming to rest, rather, in a reification of gender. In that polarization, opposing experiences can be understood on a continuum of felt experiences of the “body.” This is the imaginary or phantasmic “body” that derives its energies and outlines from early experiences, dramas of opening and closing. That spectrum of bodily experiences is constitutive of “subjectivity”—the spaces of feeling that we identify as the “self.”

For me, difficulty in reading, entering the text, made for a performance of incapacity. Put more precisely: I could not see a way out of the impasse that (I see only now) consisted in denial of an interior realm of experience, in the text and in myself. That intense denial performed a function of self-preservation. So, too, the flâneur who strolls past the structures, buried or visible, absent or present, that one senses in the city and in the text, in the city as a text. In the very aimlessness of urban wanderings, chance encounters open up viewer and object to each other, in what Benjamin calls moments of “profane illumination.”

Benjamin understood this as the dialectical reality of the object, open to interactive exchange with the viewer, the flâneur, and the reader. Seemingly impassive in its physical being, the object simultaneously opens up to the inquiring gaze of the passerby: “the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room.”¹⁸ (The urban scene itself becomes a permeable passage in Benjamin’s proposal to “construct the city

topographically—tenfold and a hundredfold—from out of its arcades and its gateways, its cemeteries and bordellos, its railroad stations.”)¹⁹

Where does curiosity lead? The reader, the writer, flâneurs both, encounter more in their urban wanderings than either is required to acknowledge: “The street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward, if not to the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private. Nevertheless, it always remains the time of a childhood. But why that of the life he has lived? In the asphalt over which he passes, his steps awaken a surprising resonance. The gaslight that streams down on the paving stones throws an equivocal light on this double ground.”²⁰ On this double ground of reading, one cannot help but lose one’s footing, if one is to grasp at all the potential of the text. This is the inexhaustible capacity of the text to unsettle the reader.

This is not simply a statement of indeterminacy, but rather an opening on both sides, in the observer and in the object, of space in which interaction can occur. Is it not plausible, then, to identify the body as the source of potential for the dialectical experience that Benjamin seeks? Consider the uniqueness of the body as an “object”: it is at once inside and outside, defined by its surface, as interface between inner and outer sensations, simultaneously one’s own and yet alien.

Benjamin moves in this direction when he criticizes the Surrealists for seeking sensation as an end in itself, through esoteric experiences and encounters, and insists on the return to the object, in its material specificity.²¹ Thus he argues that the “most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process) as the profane illumination of reading about telepathic phenomena. And the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic) as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance. The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane. Not to mention that most terrible drug—ourselves—which we take in solitude.”²² The book is our dream: it reads us and gives us back to ourselves, in disguised and distorted form.

What constitutes the text as an object? The desire of the reader. How does the reader experience the text? As an object to be penetrated, as an object that can be ruptured, in an explosion of desire. The text intact, whole, on the one hand; on the other, the text shattered, subject to violent disruption, a text in fragments, exploded. Reading as the mediating activity, the activity of survival, an attempt to find a way between punishing extremes. To offset, if not to alter, the violence of the extremes.

French psychoanalyst Serge Leclaire writes that the function of the object is to conceal the “erotogenic interval,”²³ a phrase that suggests the sudden upheaval, a confusion of surfaces of the sort that so intrigued Benjamin. To such moments belongs the excitement of everyday encounters in which the past is retrieved, in which the past comes back to life. Fixed outlines of space and form, presence and absence, along with distinctions between past and present, are thus momentarily defeated.²⁴ These moments of interpenetration give rise to metaphor, or to the capacity to read metaphorically.

Leclaire starts from Freud’s understanding of pleasure as the sensation that marks the end of a state of tension. Working with a concept of pleasure that is rooted in the body, Leclaire goes on to observe that “the time of pleasure, or *jouissance*, is this time of difference, in this case the difference between more and less tension, a difference that is itself ungraspable, the quick of desire, a difference that is not the measure but the grounds of the possibility of measure.”²⁵ If we approach the “text” on the model of the “body,” we might consider this perception of an “interval,” a difference in levels of tension, as productive of the pleasure that is reading. We attempt to fit into words (the act of criticism) or to find in words (the act of reading) replications of those experiences of pleasure, in which we simultaneously find and lose the knowledge of ourselves.

My reading is an assemblage of passages, a collage of texts that I bring together into a provisional whole. As I read them, these passages are themselves passageways, dialectical objects in Benjamin’s terms, penetrable and penetrating in my encounter with them, even as they retain their otherness to my experience. The book presents the impermeable surface that is its outer covering, even as it draws us in and surrenders its contents. If, as Leclaire observes, the object is there to mask the erotogenic interval, its function can be understood as giving us—reader, flâneur—

the opportunity to experience that interval, to catch that momentary disruption, and to find in it an access to our pasts.

My reading is then a metaphoric, an unstable space. To read Zola with Walter Benjamin is to stumble into the arcade. In that loss of footing, we register the impression of a hallucinatory body: we relive the trauma of the disruption of bodily integrity. If the object yields its depth, it can do so only for the briefest moment, the “erotogenic interval,” as Leclair puts it. The place of reading is the locus of desire.

Agnon enacts this difference that is the erotogenic interval over and over, in the array of scenes that constitute his fiction. His writing is rich in substitutions of text for body, on the model, more often than not, of Torah as the body or blueprint for the world. Objects in his fiction derive their fascination from that primal text. If there is a measure to be taken here, it concerns the degrees of approach and avoidance that can be discerned in the responses of his fictional subjects to the phantasmic objects that draw them. Many a narrative takes shape as the variant of a quest for an elusive object. Perhaps most spectacularly, this can be seen in “Agadat hasofer,” the very story that so intrigued Benjamin when Gershom Scholem read it to him. The scribe’s investment in the text he inscribes constitutes that “object” as both Torah and body, his wife’s and his own. The story plays out a hallucinatory confusion of bodies that culminates in a *Totentanz*, a dance of death, and that was in fact the original title Agnon gave it.

But I would not overlook the suggestive shifts and exchanges among bodies and books that are to be found in other, less Gothic texts, including those novels I have discussed here. Agnon works with the everyday objects whose dialectical potential Benjamin so esteems. A stray mutt on the streets of Jerusalem, a color illustration in an old book, the mute body of a shell-shocked soldier: each partakes in that “profane illumination” in which ghostly correspondences are disclosed. The metaphoric of desire is a story of substitutions, in which one object takes the place of another. None suffices. None can be sufficient, since it is the experience of that interval that constitutes desire, not the object itself.

One catches oneself in reading: the thought is there to be discerned, in, among, and through the passages. The critic as flâneur recounts the urban wanderings that

constitute her reading, asking to find her own answers in chance encounters that shock in their strange familiarity. An impasse yields to passage. One reads through.

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NOTES

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 389.
- 2 See Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edward Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978).
- 3 Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991).
- 4 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 60.
- 5 See Vanessa R. Schwartz, "The Morgue and the Musée Grévin: Understanding the Public Taste for Reality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris," in *Spectacles of Realism: Body, Gender, Genre*, ed. Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 268–93.
- 6 "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Reflections*, 188.
- 7 "A Berlin Chronicle," 27.
- 8 This image of the road cut through the jungle belongs to the series of reflections that Benjamin titled "One-Way Street." The epigraph to the collection acknowledges the impact on him of the woman with whom he had a relationship at the time; he names the street "Asja Lacis Street after her who as an engineer cut it through the author" (*Reflections*, 61). Benjamin marks the impact of her intervention as the stimulus for him to map the terrain that is his writing. In this passage, Benjamin uses this tactile exploration of the terrain of a text to express what it feels like to copy out a text, and we might think of "Benjamin the scrivener," Richard

- Sieburth's phrase, copying out texts in the vaulted reading room of the old Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Richard Sieburth, "Benjamin the Scrivener," in *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13–37.
- 9 "A Berlin Chronicle," 25–26.
 - 10 S. Y. Agnon, *Kol sipurav shel Sh. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1968), vol. 2 *Elu ve'elu*. For a translation, see S. Y. Agnon, *A Book That Was Lost' and Other Stories*, ed. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman (New York: Schocken, 1995); Dan Laor, *Hayei Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 112–13.
 - 11 S. Y. Agnon, *Tmol shilshom*, vol. 5 in *Kol sipurav shel Sh. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1968); *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); *Shirah* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1979); *Shirah*, trans. Zeva Shapiro (New York: Schocken, 1989).
 - 12 "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Reflections*. Interest in conceptualizing and studying traumatic neuroses formed a significant outcome of World War I and continues today, in the area of "trauma studies." See also recent developments in the study of the connection between traumatic war neuroses and the truncated bodies of Dadaist art.
 - 13 *Ad henah*, vol. 7 in *Kol sipurav shel Sh. Y. Agnon*. See my essay in the *Festschrift* for Gershon Shaked, in press.
 - 14 *Reflections*, 56–57.
 - 15 J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York and London: Norton, 1973), 111–12.
 - 16 Hal Foster, "An Art of Missing Parts," *October* 92 (spring 2000): 129.
 - 17 Peter Schwenger, "Corpsing the Image," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (spring 2000): 407, 413.
 - 18 *The Arcades Project*, 417.
 - 19 *The Arcades Project*, 83.
 - 20 *The Arcades Project*, 416.
 - 21 For a discussion of Benjamin's view of the fascination of the image, in contrast to Surrealism's, see Ackbar Abbas, "On Fascination: Walter Benjamin's Images," *New German Critique* 48 (fall 1989): 43–62.
 - 22 *Reflections*, 189–90.
 - 23 Serge Leclair, *Psychoanalyzing: On the Order of the Unconscious and the Practice of the Letter*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford University Press, 1998), 54.

- 24 I am reminded here of the work of Daniel Libeskind on the Berlin Jewish Museum. See James Young's discussion of Libeskind's work, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (Yale University Press, 2000), 152–183.
- 25 *Psychoanalyzing*, 46.