

B E T W E E N
E X I L E
A N D
R E T U R N



S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing

Anne Golomb Hoffman

State University of New York Press

Chapter 2

Scribal Fictions: Franz Kafka and S. Y. Agnon

The issue of the relationship of Franz Kafka to S. Y. Agnon has prompted lively critical debates.¹ Questions of influence aside, however, these two twentieth-century writers can be read usefully, one against the other, for their concern with writing and textuality. In the short fiction of Kafka and Agnon, the center of energy shifts from a represented world to problems of perception and interpretation that are shared by reader and characters. Kafka and Agnon situate representations of writing and inscription so as to allow the reader to experience and trace significant variations on a spectrum of possible relations to writing. I turn now to two stories, both originally published in 1919, that start from attention to representations of writing and dramas of inscription. As exotic as they may seem, “In the Penal Colony” and “Tale of the Scribe” are two stories of reading and writing, although, as we shall see, “reading” and “writing” are scarcely innocent processes. I begin with a story about inscription and, from there, go on to a story about a scribe.

“In the Penal Colony”: the Writing Machine

Consider Kafka’s Traveler in “In the Penal Colony” (“*In der Strafkolonie*”).² As the first character we meet and the one through whom the story is focalized, the Traveler mediates the reader’s introduction to the harsh landscape of the penal colony. (The translation refers to the “explorer,” but the original is *der Reisende* or “traveler,” rather than *der Forscher* or “explorer,” a term that would carry with it more of a sense of goal-directedness.) The reader moves easily into an identification with the Traveler, who offers a comforting familiarity, in contrast to the harsh, alien setting of the penal colony. As we take note of the Traveler’s concern for due process and the rights of the accused, we are all the more likely to associate ourselves

with this apparent representative of enlightened western views of justice.

Our efforts to decipher the elements of the story conform roughly to the Traveler's efforts at understanding the penal colony, as he is introduced to the old Commandant's system of justice by the Officer who is its chief proponent. The central precept in the old Commandant's system—"Guilt is never to be doubted"—may strengthen the reader's identification with the Traveler; he and we can share a reaction of distaste for an apparently primitive system that is alien to both of us. Nevertheless, the Traveler's illusion of neutrality, as well as his sense of his own advancement relative to the primitive penal colony, are jarred through his reaction to the Officer, the regime of the old Commandant and, most prominently, to the machine.

The process of the story involves a shift in the Traveler's perspective from his declared distance, to an unacknowledged yet tangible sympathy for the Officer. This shift causes the Traveler ultimately to protect the Officer's right to place himself on the machine, although that sympathy is denied in his parting gesture of threat to the condemned man who wishes to accompany him. These shifts in the Traveler's position are more often recorded, rather than commented on in the narrative, so that the reader may experience an unease that reflects the dislocation of an identification that the story elicits so smoothly at the outset. In effect, the text manipulates the reader, moving him/her through a variety of subject positions in relation to the archaic that acquires representation through the machine.

In this respect, the voyage that has brought the Traveler to the penal colony, remote from his presumably European homeland, carries with it a psychological weight not unlike that attached to the map of Africa in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. These two great texts of modernism utilize a geography that is traceable not only on the map of European colonialism, but also on the map of psychic structure that Freud, contemporary and kin of the modernists, was charting. For Conrad, for Kafka, and, I think, for Agnon as well, the text moves in two directions at once; it retains its mimetic relationship to the social world, while offering the reader graphic suggestions of unconscious operations.

The reader traces a writing in "In the Penal Colony" that does not so much permit an analysis of character from the outside, as it draws the reader into a drama of inscription that undoes the distance between reader and text and elicits responses from more primitive strata of our mental lives. If it is ultimately the stance of the enlightened, detached observer, the Traveler, that is deconstructed and

satirized through the process of the story, then the reader loses at least some of the privilege and distance that the story seemed at first to offer.

The machine, center of attraction from which the Traveler tries so hard to avert his eyes, is of course a writing machine. It produces *die Schrift*, script or writing, but also the term for Scripture [Politzer 1966, 106]. We see the Traveler attempt to focus at first on irrelevant details, apparently in order to avoid confronting the machine and the procedures that the Officer is intent on showing him. The narrative traces subtle shifts in the Traveler's relationship to the machine, from his initial efforts to ignore it through the subtle signs of his gradually awakening interest, as well as his efforts to hold onto his role as representative of scientific advance.

According to the old Commandant's regime, the condemned man is placed on the machine that conforms to the shape of his body. His sentence is inscribed in his body by the needles in the machine so that he "reads it in his body" only at the moment of dying. What can the nature of such a writing be if it "communicates" its message to its addressee only in death?

To understand better the strange fascination of this cruel writing, I suggest an analogy between inscription, as it is carried out by Kafka's machine, and inscription as a term for the dynamic process through which "self" is constituted. Freud's [1925] metaphor of the mystic writing pad sets inscription as the model for the formation of the unconscious; the unconscious is like the child's toy, the "mystic writing pad," where inscription is always already there.³ Lacan's [1977] discussion of the formation of subjectivity refers to a series of splittings inscribed in the subject, beginning with the hypothesized repression of the signified as the origin of the unconscious. Lacan's emphasis is not so much on the repression of the signified as lost object, as it is on the consequences of that loss as reflected in the play of signifiers that characterizes language. "Inscription" expresses the impact of the successive splittings through which subjectivity takes shape.

The question for the critic is to consider how representations of writing work to recall these primal dramas of inscription. Together with the Traveler, we may see the condemned man who is to be placed on the machine as a subliterate creature. While the Officer describes the enlightenment that will come to this primitive creature, we become aware of a cruel irony: It is only in the moment of death that the condemned man will achieve "literacy" (hypothetically, at least). This "literacy," I would argue, is roughly analogous to entry

into the symbolic order. In a strange reversal of the normal developmental path, the condemned man's life ends in the very moment that would make him a participant in the world of language. Despite the irony, I would argue that the reader is positioned to identify with a description that mimics certain features of development.

In the primal story that is the backdrop for Freud's masculine model of development, and to which the male universe of Kafka's penal colony appears to conform, the punishment for rebellion against the father is castration [Freud 1912–13; 1923a]. Oedipal rebellion finds its resolution in the child's acceptance of symbolic castration: by giving up the wish to take the father's place, the child gains entry to the social world whose authority the father represents. The system of the old Commandant forecloses the possibility of any such compromise, filial or scriptural, in its brutal finality. The unmediated primitiveness of the machine suggests the writing of the terrifying Oedipal father, unmodified by any form of compromise.

Whereas the castration complex, through which the Oedipal complex is resolved, allows the subject to survive at the cost of *symbolic* castration, the regime of the old Commandant finds expression in the machine whose inscription is definitive in a way that precludes individuality. This machine reinscribes castration, over and over, fusing the subject with the letter of the Law, in a punishment no "son" can survive. It is a dire language, inscrutable yet awesome in its capacities for a definitive writing.

What is the reader's relationship to all of this? If, according to the old Commandant's theory, the "punishment" that the machine inscribes is a message intended for the condemned man as addressee, then the Traveler and the reader occupy the position of secondary addressees or witnesses, who stand by, listen and watch. Our relative distance does not, however, remove us entirely from the scene of reading and we are not immune to its effects.

The position of the Officer is more ambiguous: he both represents the authority of the sender, the old Commandant, but is also subject to inscription himself. As high priest of a deified machine, to which he will eventually offer himself as sacrifice, the Officer describes for the Traveler and for us a particular relationship to writing and textuality. He lays out the old Commandant's plans for the Traveler to admire, with all the reverence accorded to sacred writing. The Traveler's responses reflect the polite disinterest of the tourist and prompt further exposition from the Officer:

The traveler would have liked to say something appreciative, but all he could see was a labyrinth of lines crossing and recrossing each

other, which covered the paper so thickly that it was difficult to discern the blank spaces between them. “Read it,” said the officer. “I can’t,” said the traveler. “Yet it’s clear enough,” said the officer. “It’s very ingenious,” said the traveler evasively, “but I can’t make it out (*entziffern*).” “Yes,” said the officer with a laugh, putting the paper away again, “it’s no calligraphy for schoolchildren. It needs to be studied closely. I’m quite sure that in the end you would understand it, too. Of course the script can’t be a simple one; it’s not supposed to kill a man straight off, but only after an interval of, on an average, twelve hours. . . . So there have to be lots and lots of flourishes around the actual script; the script itself runs around the body only in a narrow girdle; the rest of the body is reserved for the embellishments.” [Kafka 1971, 149; 1946, 107].

The description of labyrinthine, crisscrossing lines conveys the intensity that emanates from this writing, both as it is described for us and also in the role it plays in the text. “*Kunstvoll*” and “*Schönschrift*” are the terms that Kafka uses to describe the old Commandant’s handwriting, suggesting that it is truly an “artwriting,” the writing of art, even the art of writing for Kafka. Heinz Politzer was the first to see in this description of writing an uncanny description of one of Kafka’s own manuscript pages, which he describes as resembling “hieroglyphics of an unknown language, beautiful and terrifying at the same time” [1966, 105].

The description of the old Commandant’s plans suggests a vortex of inscription. This representation of writing constitutes an emblem of the text we read. It is the writing of writing. The activity of critical reading, like the Traveler’s interpretive effort, is an attempt at a deciphering that can never be completed. The Traveler may not move beyond his initial inability to decipher—*entziffern*—the artful script, but he does remain fascinated by and respectful of the machine and its powers of inscription.

Like Conrad’s Marlow on the trail of Kurtz, the Traveler pursues the “horror” while maintaining a distance from it that insures his survival. Like Kurtz, the Officer goes so far that he cannot return, nor does he seem to want to. Armchair tourists that we are, we readers follow at a distance the responses of the Traveler and the Officer to the archaic machine to which the Officer serves as guide. These territorial demarcations, so vital to the Traveler and so helpful to the reader, hold, however, only insofar as we resist the process of psychic reinscription that is reading. We may not be able to read the writing on the old Commandant’s documents, but we can write the reading that is our interaction with the text and glimpse in that reading traces of our own archaic script.⁴

To “write” such a “reading,” we must consider several possibilities, some even mutually contradictory. In its most shocking assertion, the text admits the possibility that the Traveler is *attracted* to the idea of perfect inscription, or a definitive writing, no matter how barbaric he (or we) may find the presentation of that system. As the Officer describes it, the writing transforms body into text in what amounts to an idealized reading experience:

But how quiet he grows at the sixth hour! Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than that the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher (*entziffern*) the script with one’s eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. [Kafka 1971, 150; 1946, 108].

The reading in the body that the Officer describes here stands in strong contrast to the Traveler’s inability to *decipher—entziffern—*the script of the old Commandant’s plans. *Entziffern* is the key term in both passages. The Traveler gazes at an impenetrable text—the scrawled writings of the old Commandant. That script—archaic writing—is alien to him; he can find no common ground with it. By virtue of his identification with the old Commandant, this same text is clear to the Officer, for whom it offers a clear reading of the guilt and sentence of any man. The Traveler can get only so close to that reading as to acquiesce in the possible validity of the Officer’s reading: “Perhaps I am prepared to believe you.” The conciliatory gesture in his words suggests an approach to the text that modifies his distance ever so slightly.

The Officer’s description of past executions renders the climactic moment as one in which bystanders share:

Well, and then came the sixth hour! It was impossible to grant all the requests to be allowed to watch it from nearby. The Commandant in his wisdom ordained that the children should have the privilege of always being at hand; often enough I would be squatting there with a small child in either arm. How we all absorbed the look of transfiguration on the face of the sufferer, how we bathed our cheeks in the radiance of that justice, so hard to achieve and so quick to fade! [Kafka 1971, 154; 1946, 112–113].

This access to participation, made possible by contiguity, suggests communal share in religious experience, and the attempt to achieve

an experience so powerful that it dissolves distinctions between audience and celebrant.⁵

The Officer refers to a moment that is “so hard to achieve and so quick to fade” (*dieser endlich erreichten und schon vergehende Gerechtigkeit*). The wording is characteristic of Kafka in extending and withdrawing a possibility within a single phrase. And indeed a carefully constructed narrative structure allows for the description of the moment, but simultaneously discredits it in the possibility that the Officer’s description may not be reliable. The Officer is giving a retrospective account of executions from the time of the old Commandant as part of a pitch for their resumption. Therefore, his “description” may be more a wishful utterance than an “historical” account. Nevertheless, the felt impact of experience in the language works more persuasively than do doubts about the Officer’s reliability. The language of the text constitutes a reality in the utterance that allows for an alarming possibility, *idealizing* the moment of inscription for subject and for audience.

It is perhaps the central paradox of the story that this account of a fatal inscription of the subject is conveyed to us as a moment of radiant fulfillment. One wonders if Kafka’s text does not manage to have it both ways. Does the radiance on the face of the victim suggest participation in a fusion that is lost with access to language and the formation of subjectivity? From the perspective of the Officer, the condemned man achieves an identity with the text that is to be envied—“a moment that might tempt one to get under the harrow oneself,” which is what the Officer *does* do in a final gesture of fidelity and submission to the old Commandant. This may suggest to the reader the recapture of a kind of fusion that the advent of language, not to mention reading, precludes. This moment in the text is constituted out of the conjunction of impossibilities: a return to oneness and identity with the text, but at the same time, the affirmation of the authority of the paternal in the machine, together with an obliteration of self.

The machine’s very literal inscription suggests a masochistic yielding to the power of the Father, and we may be tempted to read this as the Officer’s longing for the Father. Then comes the joke, however: we witness the butchery of the Officer that is the outcome of his submission to the machine and his anticipation of enlightenment. The Officer’s expectation goes awry. Far from achieving identity with writing through the experience of becoming text (a process suggesting self-immolation on the altar to the Father), the Officer ends up with a spike through his head and a blank stare of noncomprehension on his face. The reader is forced into complicity

with this brutal joke on the ideal textuality that the text both envisions and derides. We are made to see it both ways in the two images of body and text that the story juxtaposes: the *dead corpse* versus the *illuminated text*. From this angle, "In the Penal Colony" can be read as an elaborate dance of approach and avoidance, intrusion, entry and withdrawal, that takes place in and around the body of the text or the text as inscribed body.

It is the Traveler who survives in the ambivalence of his reading, an ambivalence that combines elements of attraction with civilized horror in reaction to the writing machine. He offers the middle ground for a range of subject positions in relation to the writing machine; these range from the virtual noncomprehension of the condemned man to the off-the-scene new Commandant whose interests are so far removed from the old order that he is only interested in "harborworks," or links to the world beyond the penal colony. In between, we have the Traveler whose high degree of cultural literacy keeps him from the kind of primitivity the story depicts, yet does not keep him from being attracted to it. Opposite to the Traveler is the Officer who attempts to mediate a return to the unmediated and on whom the contradictions of the text are most obviously carried out.

"Tale of the Scribe": Falling into the Writing

Inscription in "In the Penal Colony" can be compared with the ideal of writing in "Tale of the Scribe" (*Agadat hasofer*), a story that culminates in a grotesque, neoromantic fusion of Scribe, Torah scroll and wife's wedding dress.⁶ While one could say that these two stories of Agnon and Kafka are *about* the function of inscription in subjectivity, each dismantles the distance implied in the relation of narration to its object, in the sense that a story is "about" something other than itself.

The central text in Agnon's story is explicitly identified as the Torah, with all the socio-historical weight that the designation carries. Unlike the indeterminate and suggestively unnamed writing (*die Schrift*) of Kafka's story, the identification of the Torah in Agnon invokes the status of that text as a divinely inspired writing. Nevertheless, the Torah in Agnon's story is less a fixed and determinate text as it is the charged field for erotic and thanatotic drives, as well as social tensions.

Ecstatic fusion with text in "Tale of a Scribe" parallels fusion or "reading" experience in "In the Penal Colony." A relationship analogous to that of Kafka's Officer and machine can be discerned in the

move of Agnon's Scribe toward erotic fusion with the Torah scroll. In "Tale of the Scribe," we see enacted in relation to the Torah an array of subject positions not unlike that found in Kafka's story. They include (1) the controlled, eloquent and essentially distant piety of the narrative voice; (2) the position of members of the community who wish to purchase a share in *mitsvot* (deeds of merit) by using Raphael, the Scribe, as mediator between themselves and the Torah scrolls he inscribes; (3) the ambiguous and ambivalent combination of erotic and ascetic tendencies that marks the relationship of Raphael and his wife to one another and to the sacred texts that adorn their walls; (4) the position of the childless Miriam, for whom the Torah scroll becomes interchangeable with a child.

Raphael the Scribe completes the Sefer Torah he is inscribing, but as he concludes the writing, he falls into the mirror, Narcissus-like, completing the final letters of the scroll himself, isolating himself from the community with whom he might have shared the *mitzvah* (deed of merit). (His childless wife turns green and dies.) Erotic images of text and writer come together in a *Totentanz*, a dance of death in which the structure of realistic narrative and distinctions between subject and object collapse. In effect, one could say that it is the posture of the writer as faithful scribe that is deconstructed through the text's disclosure of the complex play of drives that enter into the writing process.

Raphael the Scribe is like Kafka's Officer in his extreme devotion to a regime of writing and a fidelity to the Father that exceed social norms. "All day he sat in his house communing with his soul in solitude, completely within the frame of Torah. He did not mingle with other human beings and was thus saved from any of the transgressions between man and man, and remained holy in his speech, thought, and deed, and was spared all temptation and distraction" [Agnon 1970, 9; 1968, 2:133].⁷ The narrator situates Raphael "within the frame of Torah," a phrase that appears to affirm structure. A translation that is closer to the Hebrew phrase "*sagurumesugarbetokh dalet amot shel Torah*" would be "closed up within the four cubits of Torah." This wording carries talmudic resonances that strengthen the sense of enclosure of the individual within the sacred text. (See Berakhot 8a for a sample source text.) This phrasing acquires more force as we realize that it concretizes Raphael's vocational activities of inscribing Torah scrolls.

The vocational structure in which Raphael is so securely housed appears here to be defined, quite literally, by the name of God:

He sat secluded and isolated and no one was with him except His Name, may He be blessed, and he studied a portion of the Talmud in order to tie together the oral teachings with the written ones, and concentrated on all the sacred meanings hinted at in Scripture. He was careful never to write the Holy Name without first having purified his body. For this reason he often wrote an entire sheet of parchment but left blank the spaces for the Holy Name, and later he wrote the Name in the blank spaces only after having immersed himself again in the purifying bath. [Agnon 1970, 9–10; 1968, 2:133]

The activity of transcription that the Scribe carries out is central to the transmission of Torah. Despite the importance of that writing to tradition, however, it is still transcription, a mediated writing. The intensity that surrounds Raphael's scribal practice expresses the effort to obviate the distance and displacement that characterize any mediation. The description of ritual in this passage expresses an effacing of individuality that would transform the Scribe into a vehicle for the writing that is his labor. His is a writing to get out of writing or, put differently, a writing that moves in the direction of the definitive writing, signified here by the Holy Name.

In Agnon's art, an originary loss is often presented as the stimulus for verbal activity, as for example, in the oft-cited passage "The Secret of Writing Stories" [in "The Sense of Smell" 1968, v. 2]. That passage pictures the writer, after the destruction of the Temple. No longer able to join the priests in song, he sits at a distance writing songs of lamentation for the lost glories of the Temple. (See chapter 6 for a discussion of this passage.) In such presentations, art is predicated on loss; it can never recapture the sense of participation in the sacred that the priestly song expresses. Agnon tends to depict the very activity of the writer as the effort to regain an identity with the source (or source text) that linguistic practice, or the condition of being in language, does not permit. In "Tale of the Scribe," the zeal of the Scribe expresses the urgency of such an effort at return and hints even at the cessation of desire through restoration of a lost object: Raphael is described as "*nitsul meta'avah vehemdah*" or "saved from desire and appetite" through his scribal activity.

The drive to return to the source or to recapture a lost fusion may make itself felt within narrative, but its success would endanger the very structure that gives it expression. Narrative is predicated on differentiations of a sort that Raphael, in effect, tries to undo. Out of this tension, Agnon's story records a series of encounters between

text, mirror, and eye, as it moves towards a neoromantic denouement. The carefully constructed home of Raphael and Miriam, with its partitions between marriage bed and workspace, maintains a distinction between Eros and God's work, supporting the ascetic purity of Raphael's scribal activities.

The interactions of husband and wife disclose a structure within which desire is both stimulated and deflected. Most interesting is the role that a text and its reflection play in the complex space of their interaction. On the east wall is a hanging Miriam embroidered, with the inscription, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" [cf. Ps. 24:1]. In each of the four corners of the embroidery there is a square which contains the words: "I have set the Lord always before me" [Agnon 1970, 12; cf. Ps. 16:8]. On the opposite wall hangs a mirror. Within this highly emblematic structure, a drama of the gaze is enacted:

When Miriam visits the bathhouse Raphael remains in the House of Study. When she returns home she dresses in fine clothes like a bride on her wedding, and stands before the mirror. [. . .] and at that moment the thought enters her mind to make herself beautiful for her husband. But then she sees reflected in the mirror the east-wall embroidery with its scenes and those two lions with their mouths open; immediately she is startled and shrinks back: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

And when Raphael returns home after the prayers and sees his wife in her true beauty reflected in the mirror, he is immediately attracted to her. He goes toward her to make some pleasing remark. But when he is near her, His Name, may He be blessed, flashes before him out of the mirror. Immediately he stops and recites devoutly and in holiness: "I have set the Lord always before me," and shuts his eyes before the glory and awe of the Name. Both turn away silently [Agnon 1970, 15–16; 1968, 2:133].

For Raphael and Miriam, the play of images reflected in the mirror suggests a drama of desire in the gaze of each. Miriam's reflection in the mirror gives her back an image of her own desire, but that desire is deflected as her gaze encounters not only her image but the reflection of the stern scriptural saying that appears to appropriate all desire to the Father. Eros is deflected by the scriptural text, stern paternal law supplanting the erotic relation to the Sabbath queen. Even more graphically, Raphael's erotic gaze is interrupted by the reflection of God's name and his own immediate response to it. Neither husband nor wife can complete the move to appropriate the

desire that the mirrored image of the other initiates. The trajectories of desire meet and cross in the gaze, but never reach consummation.

As a result, structures of desire and procreation repeat themselves in the activities of husband and wife without coinciding. Miriam's prayers and activities parallel Raphael's devotion to the Torah scroll he is inscribing: she fashions baby clothes as he shapes a text; she prays for fertility, as he sanctifies himself for writing. Miriam identifies her own activities with the story of Reb Gadiel, "the infant who had been born by virtue of his father's having taught Torah to Jewish children" [Agnon 1970, 11; 1968, 2:134]. The comparison implies a wish for procreation through the text that elides the role of woman. Miriam plays a double role, then, as the *object* of desire, and in providing an ironic *analogue* to Raphael's scribal activities. Her presence clarifies the nature of desire by allowing for elaboration of its operations; at the same time, it obscures the question of the object of desire, in a confusion of Torah scroll, holy writing, and the body of the woman. In light of her double function in narrative structure, it is interesting to note that Miriam's role came into prominence only late in the history of revisions of "Tale of the Scribe."⁸

With an effect similar to the tension produced by Miriam's amplified role, the epigraph to the story invokes another woman, whose title supplies an ironic counterpoint to the narrative. If we pause momentarily to take note of that epigraph, we see that the dedication of the story to the author's wife, Esther, inserts at least a note of irony into this story of a scribe's (or writer's) turn away from social life into textuality. (The epigraph in the Hebrew is slightly more flowery and even more ironic in its tribute to "the mistress of my house.") The epigraph charts a space that is proximate to, but not quite part of the text proper. Like Kafka's bachelor parables, which can be traced back to his diaries where they appear to originate in a drawn-out debate over writing versus marriage, Agnon's epigraph makes a commitment to marriage that the story reveals to be an ambivalent gesture. While the epigraph provides affirmation of the social realm that includes marriage, the conclusion of "Tale of the Scribe" turns away from sociality, allowing the full emergence of instinctual rhythms that might otherwise remain bound within syntax and the structure of predication.

While the story appears to take at face value Raphael's devotion to his work, there are subtle indications that his excess is not simply to be understood as piety. One must read through what appears to be the narrator's approval of Raphael to realize that the text also makes

available to us constructions that may undermine that apparent endorsement. The reflexive piety (e.g., “may He be blessed”) that characterizes the narrative voice may lull the reader’s tendencies to suspicious reading and strengthen the impression that we are reading a pious tale of pious deeds. Thus, for example, when the desire that Raphael and Miriam experience as their gazes meet in the mirror is disrupted by the scriptural sayings on the wall, the reader may simply accept those sayings as a pious endorsement of Raphael’s asceticism, or more accurately, of his deflection of desire into scribal activities. Nevertheless, that reading is subjected to the possibility of an irony that emerges once those emblematic writings on the wall are restored to their scriptural context. If the reader gets past the seamless web of pious narrative, the text invites some intertextual comparisons that complicate a simple reading of Raphael’s piety.

The drama of mirror, gaze and text that engages Raphael the Scribe appears to produce a yielding to the Father, however perverse a reading of the law of the Father that may be. Two later interactions involving mirror and gaze, however, complicate such a reading. First, in the process of writing a Torah scroll in memory of his wife after her death, Raphael reaches the point at which he must immerse himself in a ritual bath in order to purify himself before writing the Divine Name. Because the bathhouse is closed, Raphael breaks the ice in the river so that he can immerse himself; this gesture carries with it the pious fervor of the man who, as the narrator puts it, in a traditional phrasing, “stands in icy water on a snowy day” [Agnon 1970, 20; 1968, 2:141].⁹ At the same time, however, breaking the ice to immerse himself in the river can be read as the moment of the narcissistic fall: Raphael goes back into the mirror, drowning into himself in a moment of icy ecstasy.

This double reading of his immersion is confirmed almost immediately. On the verge of completing the Torah scroll, Raphael leaves a few verses in outline so as to be able to permit a group of Jews the *mitsvah* of filling them in, but as he is about to go in search of a *minyán* or quorum for prayer, he pauses to look in the mirror:

Raphael pulled aside the end of the sheet, looked into the mirror, and saw his own face, and the east-wall embroidery across the room, and the scroll he had written, with the hollow, outlined letters at its end. At that moment his soul stirred and he returned to the table, took the quill, and filled in the letters in the scroll he had written in memory of his wife’s soul. When he completed the task he rolled up the scroll, raised it high dancing with great joy, and he

leaped and danced and sang in honor of the Torah. [Agnon 1970, 21–22; 1968, 2:142].

Literally captivated by this specular unity of text and self, Raphael turns away from the *mitsvot* of social life and falls into the hollow letters of the Torah.

At the story's conclusion, the frame collapses and the narrative voice records something to which it is external and which it cannot fully explicate for the reader, who stands at an even further remove. Barriers between past and present, writer and text, dead and living, subject and object dissolve in a fusion toward which the narrative does not take a stand:

The lamp flickers. Raphael is wrapped in his prayer shawl, a Torah scroll in his arm, and the scroll has a mantle of fine silk on which the name of Miriam the wife of Raphael the scribe is embroidered. The house becomes filled with many Torah scrolls, and many elders dancing. As they dance they neither lift their feet nor bend their knees, but move as if they had no joints. They dance without motion, revolving their bodies, and Miriam stands in the center, her face covered, dancing with her shoulders, her arms raised into the emptiness of the room. She approaches Raphael's scroll. She takes off her veil and covers her face with her hands. Suddenly her hands slide down, her face is uncovered, and her lips cling to the mantle of the Torah scroll in Raphael's arms. [Agnon 1970, 25; 1968, 2:144–45].

This hallucinatory moment actually repeats Raphael's memory of the Simhat Torah celebration when Miriam kissed the white cover of the Torah he was carrying and dropped a candle that burned his robe; this double defilement led to their eventual betrothal.¹⁰ If the text has thus far defended itself, however unpersuasively, against that identification of text (Torah scroll) and body, those narrative defenses here give way. In effect, the conclusion collapses at the most literal level the *mehitsah* (religiously imposed separation) that defines the home of Raphael and Miriam in its delineation of masculine and feminine space and its apparent relegation of sexuality to the sphere of marriage, subordinate to holy writing. Raphael dies into the text whose invitation, we now see, is that of the body of the woman.

Writing, too, has its Eros, as becomes fully evident. In the erotic fusion of the ending, the sexuality of the text, or more accurately perhaps, of Raphael the Scribe's relation to it, emerges fully. We witness the demonic fusion of Miriam's wedding dress, which is also

her shroud, and the covering for the Torah scroll: “Suddenly a tongue of flame leaped up and illumined the room. Its light framed the face of Raphael the scribe who sank down with his scroll. His wife’s wedding dress was spread out over him and over his scroll” [Agnon 1970, 25; 1968, 2:145]. That enigmatic movement of sinking with the scroll marks in effect the disappearance of Raphael and the end of the story. While Raphael’s act of filling in the outlined letters of the Torah scroll appeared to express his appropriation of the text for himself, we see now his disappearance into it. But that “it” can no longer simply be identified as the scroll; the text of the Father is enshrouded in the garment of the woman, signaling the mingling of that paternal writing with an archaic matrix.¹¹

The Body of the Text

Available to Agnon in his writing are the many ways in which Jewish mysticism invokes the relation to the text of Torah, which reveals itself to be fluid, literally engaging and world-enclosing. Gershom Scholem has shown how the relationship to the writing of the sacred text plays a very central role in Jewish mysticism, so that ecstatic states are achieved through immersion in a holy alphabet.¹² In effect, the ecstatic fusion with which “Tale of the Scribe” ends dissolves the structure of narrative, which rests on a sustained system of intersubjective differences.

In Kafka’s story, the depiction of the comparable moment occurs in the Officer’s *description* of a past execution. The moment is mediated and attenuated by the fact that it is retrospection and by the structure of differences among narrator, teller (Officer), listener (Traveler and reader). That the moment depicted is nevertheless so intense in its impact testifies to the defining impact of inscription in the formation of subjectivity.

Clayton Koelb [1989] has argued that in “In the Penal Colony,” Kafka depicts a kind of reading that consists of the penetration of the reader by the text, at the risk of obliterating the reader. He contrasts this with the type of reading that allows the reader to pass through the text unharmed—in a manner like that of the Traveler, we could say. Koelb reads “In the Penal Colony” as sexualization of the first type of reading: the machine, identified through such adjectives as “erect” and “stiff,” rapes the condemned man, who becomes the female “stuff” to be written on [1989, 70–73]. In fact, despite a passing reference to the sentimentality of female spectators, the penal colony

is effectively a world without women; the repressed body of the woman resurfaces in the intersubjective drama of writing.

If Koelb is correct in interpreting the machine as high-tech rapist of the condemned man whose position is essentially female as the “stuff” that is written on, then we can see here an indication of the ambiguous sexualization of the writing process. Writing includes *both* the exaggeratedly masculine activity of the machine’s multiple needles and the equally exaggerated masochistic posture of the feminized body that is inscribed. Both of these positions belong to writing as Kafka portrays it, and neither is to be found without the other.

In Agnon’s story, the female is very much present, in a gendered dichotomy that evidently became more pronounced as Agnon put the original tale through revisions over the years. The outcome, as we have it, is a full and explicit identification of woman with the impurity of the body, but one that demonstrates the futility of the masculine effort to achieve the ideal of a writing that will exempt itself from and purify itself of that body. The erotic fusion of Raphael the Scribe with Torah and wedding dress that brings the story to its literal and figurative climax collapses the distinctions by which Raphael has attempted to sustain his scribal identity. The Scribe is consumed by the text of the Father that has become fused with the body of the woman. The gender of writing as a masculine engraving of a female body is undone in each of these stories through dramas of inscription that demonstrate the fluctuating positions of the participants, precluding any stable identification of them.

In both Kafka and Agnon, narrative traces the desire to become text, to achieve the perfect reading or writing, to be boundary-less. In their devotion to a severe paternal standard that takes the form of an authoritative writing, Officer and Scribe share an eagerness to submit to the paternal machine. They die into the text in an ecstasy (or attempted ecstasy) that constitutes the failure-to-come-to-be of the writer. To become the writer involves both the appropriation of and the submission to the discourse of the Father, a balanced tension that we may reasonably attribute to each of the unseen authors. In each of these stories, the subject disappears back into the writing of the Father, in a dissolution that carries with it a sense of return to the body of the woman.

For Agnon, writing exists in a sociocultural context that is informed and structured by Judaism. To a certain extent, the reader can assess Raphael’s scribal practice against an inherited communal norm. Kafka’s text has less to do with an identifiable tradition. Efforts, for example, to link the regimes of old and new Commandants

with Jewish or Christian analogues are defeated by crucial inconsistencies in details.¹³ (Sokel, 1973, and Robertson, 1985, argue for approaches to Kafka in terms of the contrast between eastern European Jews as the authentic primitive and western European Jews as inauthentic pretenders, a historicizing that enriches our reading without supplanting it.) One might argue that Kafka taps into a stratum of being, a level of subject-object relationship that is prior to the identification of any particular conceptual order. In fact, I would suggest that Agnon joins him there, despite the overtly Jewish content of his texts, to engage in a comparable exploration of subject-object relationship through the text.

Paradoxically, perhaps, these stories give access not only to writing as splitting, but also as its opposite: these dramas of inscription are shot through with glimpses of a lost fusion, a prelinguistic oneness with the object that is lost with access to language. Each of these stories poses an ideal of text production: inscribing a Torah scroll in "Tale of the Scribe"; reading one's punishment in one's body, in a moment of enlightenment in "In the Penal Colony." But while the texts of Agnon and Kafka express the urge to achieve that fusion, through a move into the writing, they also parody it and subject it to irony. The joke is *in* the text and *on* the text, insofar as the writing both shapes ecstatic impulses and yet displaces and distances itself from them.

That ambivalence is here the essence of the literary: moving in two contradictory directions at once, the text marks a border that is variable and indeterminate. Here we can agree with Julia Kristeva, who argues that "textual experience represents one of the most daring explorations the subject can allow himself, one that delves into his constitutive process" [1986, 117]. For both Kafka and Agnon, reading and writing involve participation in a process of inscription that is potentially definitive or destructive of the individual (all the more so in that each invokes the weight of a definitive writing, that is Scripture). The text we read demonstrates its susceptibility to fantasies of return, of presence, of an archaic writing. Indeed the text may exert a pull on the reader's susceptibility to the invitation of an enclosing inscription. And yet both text and we survive to differ. The reader sustains at least a double position, entering the text in an engagement that allows for readings of inscription such as I have traced, but maintaining at the same time a detachment that the very position of reader brings with it.

disciple Rabbi Nathan. See editions prepared by S. A. Horodetzky [1922] and Band [1978].

8. One further note: In the tradition of the Bratslaver Hasidim, the prayer that is recited before one of R. Nahman's tales is told breaks down distinctions between teller, listener, and text [Schwartz, 223]. Through the telling of the tale, teller and listeners participate in and transmit traditional tales of the deeds of holy men. The act of telling brings the teller closer to those deeds, imparting to teller and audience a measure of the holiness of the deeds themselves. The teller participates actively in the realization of the tale and draws his audience into the narrative fabric that he weaves. The Bratslaver prayer is an invocation of the power of narrative to transform the experience of its participants.

Chapter 2.

1. Critics began to compare Franz Kafka and S. Y. Agnon early on in Agnon's literary career. The first full-length sustained comparison was Hillel Barzel's [1972]. Gershon Shaked has demonstrated the complex intertextuality that Agnon's relationship to Judaism makes possible. With specific attention to Kafka's "need to stand outside of history," Shaked contrasts Kafka's delineation of an "abstract *universal world* in a detailed and concrete manner" to Agnon's transformation of "a concrete, historical world" in his surrealist works [1987, 15].

2. "*In der Strafkolonie*" was originally published in 1919. Page numbers refer first to the 1971 edition of *The Complete Stories*, edited by Nahum Glatzer and then to the 1946 German edition. In some instances, translations may have been modified.

3. "Now some time ago there came upon the market, under the name of the 'Mystic Writing-Pad,' a small contrivance that promises to perform more than the sheet of paper or the slate. It claims to be nothing more than a writing tablet from which notes can be erased by an easy movement of the hand. But if it is examined more closely it will be found that its construction shows a remarkable agreement with my hypothetical structure of our perceptual apparatus and that it can in fact provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the notes that have been made upon it" [Freud, v. 19, [1925], p. 228].

4. Clayton Koelb [1989, 69] has written suggestively on the parallel between Freud's metaphor of the mystic writing pad, as Derrida discusses it, and Kafka's more brutal and overtly sexual representation of the writing machine.

5. The Bratslaver Hasidim recite a prayer before the telling of one of Rabbi Nahman's stories that asks for an effect of narrative, enlisting teller and listeners in the shared experience of the tale. Do we have a grotesque version of this in the Officer's description of the religious ceremonial gathering to witness the "inscription"?

6. The first version of the story that was eventually to become "*Agadat hasofer*" ("Tale of the Scribe") formed part of the Yiddish story "*Toitentants*," written in 1906–07 and published in 1911 in Galicia. "*Be'erah shel Miryam*" ("Miriam's Well") appeared in 1909 in *Hapo'el hatsair*; parts of that story eventually showed up in "Tale of the Scribe" [1919], "*Hemdats*" [1947], opening chapters of *Tmol shilshom (Only Yesterday)* [1945], parts of "*Shevuat emunim*" ("Betrothed") [1943] [Band 1968, 110–11].

7. In citing passages from "Tale of the Scribe," reference is made first to the English translation [1970] and then to the Hebrew [1968, 2:]. Translations have been modified.

8. The ingredients of the story have their origin in a Yiddish version and the 1909 "Miriam's Well" of *Hapo'el hatsair* [Band 1968, 110–11].

9. Agnon cannot have been familiar with the phrase Kafka used in a letter of 1904 to Oskar Pollak: "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us" (as cited in Koelb 1989, 72), but certainly the depiction in each of a relationship to a text in terms of penetration and breaking the ice is suggestive!

10. The holiday of Simhat Torah, "rejoicing in the Torah," celebrates the completion of the annual cycle of reading the Torah in the synagogue.

11. In effect, this amounts to an "irruption of drives within the realm of the signifier" that marks a turn "back towards the auto-erotic body" [Kristeva 1986, 102–03].

12. Gershom Scholem [1972, part 2, 167] on mysticism of letters: "For the Kabbalists, [. . .] linguistic mysticism is at the same time a mysticism of writing. Every act of speaking is, in the world of the spirit, at once an act of writing, and every writing is potential speech, which is destined to become audible." Moshe Idel [1988] makes even stronger claims for the importance of ecstatic states to Jewish mystical experience.

13. Ernst Pawel's [1984] biography offers a thorough account of Kafka's Jewishness. Raised in a western European environment that was largely Jewish but ambivalently so, Kafka's perceptions of Judaism derived initially from his father and his experiences of Prague synagogues on the High Holy Days, as well as his perfunctory performance of his bar-mitzvah ritual. As he grew older, however, a more persistent thread emerges: contact with the Yiddish theater troupe in 1911, the impact of the influx of eastern European refugees during World War I, his contact with Jiri Langer, fellow inhabitant

of Prague, who became a follower of the Belzer rebbe, his contact with Martin Buber and Buber's work on Hasidic tales, and his own ongoing attraction to Zionism and desire to learn the Hebrew language. Gershon Shaked's recent study offers a thoughtful assessment both of the evidence of Kafka's interest in currents of Jewish life, and of the ways in which the "collective consciousness of assimilated Diaspora Jewry" finds expression in his works [1987, 10].

Chapter 3.

1. Page references for Edmond Jabès refer to the English translation and then to the French. If only one reference is given, it is to the French and the translation is my own. In some instances, translations have been modified.

2. The effect is akin to the quality of polyphony in the novel, as M. M. Bakhtin [1987] defines it. This quality can be felt in the strength or autonomy of the voices in the Jabès text.

3. Susan Handelman [1982] argues for a "heretic hermeneutic," a complex of displacement and identification, in such twentieth-century thinkers as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Harold Bloom, and raises suggestive comparisons to models of interpretation in rabbinic thought. See Stern, 1984 and 1985, for critiques of Handelman's position, and Handelman, 1985, for a rebuttal.

4. Robert Goldenberg points out that as the historical identity of the rabbis subsided in importance, their names came to signify the opinions attributed to them; at the same time, however, "this withering away of earlier rabbis' historical reality served to liberate historical imagination about them" [1984, 157]. José Faur asserts that "the most important feature of Jewish literature is that the frame of reference that is to give meaning to the text is not in the text itself," thus making interpretation necessary; the aim of classical Hebrew literature, he argues, is to bring about a change in perspective in the student from third person to second, so that the "student may eventually view the Tora from the perspective of the first person" [1977, 34–35].

5. David Stern differentiates precisely between rabbinic polysemy and the contemporary notion of indeterminacy: "What differentiates midrash from indeterminacy is not its style, but rather the latter's formal resistance to closure, its final revelation of a perspective that, as Hartman writes, 'may be, precisely, the absence of one and only one context from which to view the flux of time or the empirical world, of one and only one method that would destabilize all but itself, of one and only one language to rule understanding