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S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing

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## Chapter 7

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### Inscription and Madness in *Only Yesterday*

#### **Comparative *Bildung***

In the wake of Freud's explorations of the decisive impact of the Oedipus complex in the formation of personality, it is not surprising that narrative theorists have turned to the "symbolic triad of the family" [Macksey 1983, 1008] as a fruitful starting point for studying the novel as genre.<sup>1</sup> The importance of the "paternal metaphor" or the "name of the Father" to the formation of the subject has given rise to a current emphasis in literary criticism on the search for the father as motivator in narrative.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes, we might note that the *Bildungsroman* as a literary form derives much of its narrative energies from the struggles of sons with a paternal principle: the struggle to find the father, the struggle of the hero to give birth to himself, or to be his own father.

Bringing structuralism together with linguistics, Jacques Lacan constructs the Oedipal narrative in culture as the formation of the subject through an access to language that imposes the Law of the Father: "The primordial Law is therefore that which in regulating marriage ties superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating. . . . This law, then, is revealed clearly enough as identical with an order of language" [1977, 66]. "Family" must be understood, then, not only in terms of its specific members, but also as "a set of symbolic relations which always transcend the actual persons defined by them. 'Mother' and 'father' signify cultural positions" [Silverman 1983, 182]. The novel as a genre exploits this intersection of the individual with the cultural: the specifics of plot and character carry broader resonances and tell a story that belongs ultimately to the larger domain of culture. (This patrocetric schema, however, should not lead us to overlook issues of differentiation, fusion, departure and return, that are bound up in

preoedipal relations; narrative reflects the gendered dichotomies through which subjectivity takes shape.)

In this context, I propose reading *Tmol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) as a *Bildungsroman* and major modernist text, with particular attention to the ironies generated by the failure of the subject to “develop,” that is to go through the sort of *Bildung* we might expect. From this perspective, I suggest setting *Only Yesterday* alongside James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. (Later portions of the discussion will use some comparisons to Franz Kafka’s works.)

First, some points of comparison that have bearing on the discussions of Agnon’s novel to follow. In *Portrait of the Artist*, I am struck by the importance of motherland and homeland, both Ireland and Church. The novel plays out an Oedipal drama, focusing on Stephen’s efforts to differentiate himself from the maternal, as well as on his search for a father. Despite the opening child’s-eye glimpse of the father’s hairy monocled godlike face, the novel sets up the father as the site of an inaugural lack from which the narrative takes shape. We follow Stephen as he moves among priests, sinners, nationalists, and ultimately, of course, back to Stephen himself, priest of the imagination, as he declares himself to be his own begetter. But while the novel traces the journey of the hero through Christian and pagan structures, it also sets Stephen up for an Icarian fall, which his name suggests. Doubts about Stephen’s development and self-proclaimed formation are also raised by his autoeroticism and his relation to the female. In particular, the motif of the kiss poses a threat of absorption into the maternal, from which Stephen recoils defensively. We see this in his response to his schoolmates’ teasing question “Do you kiss your mother?” (a reference to St. Aloysius Gonzaga, Joyce’s patron saint, who was too pure to do so [Anderson, 490]), as well as in his ultimate resistance to his mother’s demand that he make his Easter devotion. Along the way, Stephen sums up the danger when he refers to Ireland as “an old sow that eats her farrow.”

In *The Magic Mountain*, I would draw attention to the novel’s wonderfully seductive portrayal of illness—“life on the horizontal”—as narrative manifestation of Mann’s growing preoccupation with the death instinct in European culture. In terms of its function and link to the death drive, tuberculosis plays a role in *The Magic Mountain* that can be compared to the role of religious fanaticism in *Only Yesterday*. Disease presents itself seductively in Mann’s novel; it carries with it the aura of *Steigerung*, or elevation of the organism to

a higher plane, and so deflects the momentum of more outwardly directed ideologies of progress. (Mann was scarcely unaware of this irony and commented in a letter on the parody inherent in the notion of renewing the *Bildungsroman* through the use of tuberculosis [Reed 1974, 226].) The lure of Eros intertwined with the death drive can be seen in Hans Castorp's response to Prbislav Hippe and Clavdia Chauchat in *The Magic Mountain*. A comparable mingling of attraction with the threat of dissolution can be found in Yitzhak Kummer's response to Sonia and Shifra in *Only Yesterday*. Critic Hermann Weigand's designation of *The Magic Mountain* as a *Zeitroman*, "in that it strives to express the psychic temper of a whole age" [1965, 10], can be applied as well to Agnon's *Only Yesterday*. A look at each of the two protagonists, Yitzhak Kummer and Hans Castorp, shows us that each is a child of the times: Hans Castorp is "life's delicate child," while Yitzhak is associated with the "face of the generation."

Each of these three novels assumes decline from the world of the father. Yitzhak Kummer's father is distinguished by his failure to figure significantly in the social world. While Yitzhak looks to his grandfather, Reb Yudel Hasid, for whom miracles occurred, the narrator notes the absence of such miracles for Yitzhak. *The Magic Mountain* introduces Hans Castorp via his family lineage, from the dead father back; Hans Castorp seems to inherit from his grandfather Castorp only the latter's tremor of the neck, and the novel implies a history of decline on the order of that found in *Buddenbrooks*. Simon Dedalus, Stephen's father, cries for the dead hero Parnell and paints a picture of his own father for Stephen as a giant among men; in doing so, he raises a mythical standard that functions simply as a measure of his own impotence and inability to provide guidance for *his* son. In each of these novels, the protagonist's father is missing or can be seen as a failed son himself. Each grandfather is cited as figure of more than human proportions whose evocation serves as a measure of the decline of the present generation and so contributes to the inaugural lack that is the stimulus for the narrative.

*Only Yesterday* makes its Oedipal drama available to us through a surreal plot of filial usurpation and sacrifice. The impetus for this cataclysmic action is an inscription on a dog; that random writing stimulates a grotesque comedy of inscription. It unleashes a madness in the text of the sort that writing, in its delineation of a stable message, is meant to suppress and contain.

**“Mad Dog”**

Let us consider now a novel in which a young man, impulsively and for no apparent reason, paints the words “mad dog” on the back of a stray mutt; the dog then wanders around Jerusalem in search of a reader, who can decode for it the mysterious inscription on its back, all the while terrorizing the pious inhabitants of the city’s Me’ah She’arim section. Eventually, due to a poetic justice whose logic we shall consider, the dog bites Yitzhak Kummer, the young man who painted the words on his back, with a bite that eventually causes that young man’s death. That death, which brings the novel to a close, is linked to the coming of rains that end the drought that has been plaguing Jerusalem.

While this may all seem quite mad, we should also keep in mind that the novel is set in the period of the Second *Aliyah* or wave of immigration, during the years 1905–1914. Yitzhak Kummer, the protagonist of *Only Yesterday*, leaves his father and siblings in eastern Europe in order to journey to the land of Israel to become a pioneer. He arrives in Jaffa, joins up with his peers, most of whom more or less fail to find the work and renewal they seek. This novel captures so well the atmospheres of Jerusalem, Jaffa, and the early agricultural settlements, not to mention the lure of ideology and the promise of Zionism to youth of the period, that it has been heralded for its importance as a “social novel” and is cited as a source for descriptions of the Second *Aliyah*.<sup>3</sup>

Now there is a further problem to be considered here and that is the puzzle or contradiction in Yitzhak Kummer’s death from a dog bite given by a dog who may or may not be rabid, but who bears the *inscription* “mad dog” painted by the protagonist himself for no apparent reason. *Is the dog rabid?* Critics have taken the dog’s condition for granted<sup>4</sup>, but the question of causality cannot be answered in terms of veterinary medicine or animal psychology.<sup>5</sup> Arnold Band [1967] provides a context for the painful disproportion between Yitzhak’s negligible “sins” and the severity of his death by noting that while the novel is set in the early years of this century, Agnon wrote most of it during the years 1943–45, when the signs of the destruction of European Jewry were unmistakable. From this perspective, the irrationality of Yitzhak’s senseless death (the sacrifice of this latter-day Isaac) is a mere reflection of the larger insanity of the Holocaust. Of course, Band’s reference to extraliterary events contemporary with the writing of the novel points up rather than resolves the problem of closure. Reacting to the severity of Yitzhak’s end, Dan

Miron [1987, 10] finds the concluding conjunction of Yitzhak's death with the end of the drought to be more in keeping with a pagan notion of sacrifice than it is with Judaic values.

These discomforts with the novel's problematic closure may bear some connection to the difficulties the author appears to have experienced in fitting together the stories of Balak the dog and Yitzhak the would-be pioneer. Sara Hagar's [1978] manuscript research documents the development of the novel out of the initially separate stories of Yitzhak and the dog, Balak; her study shows the varying degrees of emphasis and ascendancy accorded to each at different points in the composition of the text and demonstrates as well the difficulties the author encountered in fitting the two plots together. The development of the manuscript of *Only Yesterday* and the history of the novel's reception draw attention to not only the author's but also the reader's discomforts with the interrelations of the two plots—Yitzhak and Balak—as well as with the problem of closure in the novel. My study of the function of the inscription of “mad dog” in the text of Agnon's novel takes further Kurzweil's investigations [1970, 104–15] into the relationship of the “demonic” dog to Yitzhak and other characters by looking at the role of the dog in the text as a writing cut loose, “demonic” in its randomness.

Rather than looking for ways of normalizing or conventionalizing the novel, I suggest that we look more closely at the relationship of the inscription—“mad dog” or *kelev meshuga'*—to the creature who bears it on his back, and the relationship of that creature—the dog as text—to the various characters, “readers” we might call them, that he encounters in his wanderings through Jerusalem. This will lead us to Yitzhak, who is writer of the inscription, reader of it and, ultimately, its victim.

If we examine the position in the text of the onset of the dog Balak's “symptoms,” we find it follows upon an extended discussion of the dissemination of that same Balak as text. Balak becomes a wandering “text” in the sense that the writing on his back is subjected to endless efforts at decoding and interpretation. This dog who bears a Hebrew inscription on his back passes by “readers” in the novel who belong to the constituent communities of Erets Yisrael, the Land of Israel. Take, for example, the Frenchman, principal of the French “Alliance” School, who reads the writing on the dog's back from left to right and calls the “Balak” as a result of that *misreading* (a name, moreover, which the narrative voice has already adopted).

The critic Bar-Adon [1977] points out the centrality of the Hebrew language to Agnon's conception of the Zionist idea and the life

of the nation. He argues as well that Agnon perceived a danger to Hebrew's ideological centrality and to its emergence as a language of daily use, amid the other languages (French, German, English) that were competing for ascendancy at the time of the Second *Aliyah*. Bar-Adon has shown the dog to be the key to a socio-linguistic critique that centers on the disputes over the revival of Hebrew and the relationship of Hebrew to other languages. These disputes over the politics of language choice were most intense in the years before World War I, that is the period in which the novel is set. One could construct a walking tour of Jerusalem out of the dog's wanderings that would cover the territory of this political-cultural struggle.

At one point in his wanderings through the Me'ah She'arim section of Jerusalem, the dog Balak encounters a sermonizing preacher, Rabbi Gronam Yekum Purkan, who mesmerizes the religious quarter of Me'ah She'arim with his apocalyptic streetcorner sermons. Rabbi Gronam is a "reader" who appropriates the dog as "text" for his own ideological needs: he places the dog in a talmudic context in order to make the dog the reading of the generation and the vehicle for his exhortation. "The face of the generation is like the face of a dog" [1968, 5: 585–86], he declares, citing a talmudic source with the passionate conviction that grows out of the speaker's confidence in his control of text and audience.<sup>6</sup> But in the midst of this fire and brimstone sermon in which he uses the dog as *mashal* or example, the *mashal* itself "takes on skin and bones" in a sudden materialization of the text that suggests a writing out of control. In fact, the subject of the interpretation asserts its primacy over the interpreter, as the barks of the dog make themselves heard over and above the shouts of the preacher.<sup>7</sup>

And what of the writer of the inscription himself as a reader? When the attention of our protagonist Yitzhak is finally drawn to the writing on the back of the dog that has been terrorizing the pious inhabitants of Me'ah She'arim, he dismisses it as a writing that he himself produced, a text that he controls: "And are we obligated to believe everything that is written?" he asks. "But I'll tell you, I myself wrote on his hide, and I know that he's a healthy dog, because if he were mad, I wouldn't have had anything to do with him" [1968, 5: 589]. But the "text" is out of control now: Yitzhak's dismissal of any danger coincides precisely with the onset of "madness" in the dog. As the narrator tells us, Balak begins to "doubt his [own] sanity" [1968, 5: 591] just at the moment that people's concerns about him are allayed by Yitzhak's words. In effect the writing asserts its independence of its putative author. The result is something of a comedy of

readers, as texts of all sorts—canine, talmudic, homiletic—run amuck.

The dog stimulates activity in the novel that surrounds questions of language, the stability of meaning, the capacity of writing to name a thing. On the one hand, dogs are shown to be the vehicle for a particularly authoritarian writing: the novel cites the practice of tying notes of excommunication onto tails of black dogs, even once writing the actual words of the ban—“*Epiqoros muḥram umenudeh*” (“banned and excommunicated heretic”)—on the fur of a bunch of dogs in order to cast out a reformer [1968, 5: 276]. On the other hand, newspapers battle in their reports on the dog Balak and their efforts to interpret the significance of the canine phenomenon, so much so that when the Jaffa papers take up the case, their readers assume that the account of the dog is an “allegory” and wonder how to “learn the hidden (meaning) from the explicit” with the end result that “the number of interpretations was the same as the number of inhabitants of the city” [1968, 5: 459]. Along with the obvious satire of reader/interpreters, the dog’s wanderings suggest the instability of any text, the breakdown of the kind of authoritarian writing the pious men of Jerusalem espouse and carry out in their posting of excommunications.

The novel shows how the newspapers pick up on this canine controversy, although, after a time, that journalistic focus gives way to coverage of the war over use of the Hebrew language. One wonders, nevertheless, whether this displacement does not rather substitute one set of signifiers for another in what is really an ongoing war over control of the “text.” Ultimately that “text” is the holy tongue and the land with which it is identified:

Since the war over Hebrew returned and reawakened, the rabbis of Jerusalem came out in a war for Torah, until all the walls were filled with writs of excommunication against breakers of the fence that was established (fenced in and bounded) by the first ones who were like angels, the elder rabbis the learned ones of former years, the strong ones of the land of Israel, in order to pass the stringent prohibition that included all the schools in the cities of the Holy Land that had taken for themselves the essence of the religion the Hebrew language and the holy tongue, for they are desecrators of the sacred.[1968, 5: 461]

The rabbis are representatives of the old *yishuv*, within the walls of the Old City, who take talmudic injunction to “build a fence



around the Torah” as the guiding precept in their violent resistance to secularizing movements. The “fence breakers” to which the passage refers are those who take sacred language beyond its paternally authorized usage; in this instance, the reference is to schools that use Hebrew as the language of instruction.<sup>8</sup> The righteous ire of the rabbi is aroused by the efforts of the new *yishuv*, prominent among its members, Eliezer Ben Yehudah (against whom a writ of excommunication was actually issued), to revive Hebrew as a language of daily use. Posted on the streetcorners of Jerusalem, these writs attempt to impose a definitive structure on physical space and on the discourse of its inhabitants. The writs are the fences that delimit land and language in an effort to constitute and sustain a definitive text.

The dog violates authorized usages of writing, acting out an upheaval of the meaning and authority that such paternal writings are meant to exclude and suppress. Specifically, Balak as a mad writing defeats the efforts of two men of Jerusalem, the preacher Rabbi Gronam and the fanatical Reb Faysh, to anchor meaning in a text. The sermonizing of Rabbi Gronam and the excommunicating activities of Reb Faysh are terminated abruptly in encounters with the dog. Rabbi Gronam is silenced when the dog disrupts his speech. Reb Faysh reaches out to retrieve and rescue what he thinks are fragments of a Hebrew text (sacred writing) lying in the garbage, but finds instead the dog with an inscription on his back; the shock of this encounter leaves him prostrate and powerless.<sup>9</sup> The radical loss of speech that both men experience testifies to their loss of power to nominate, denominate, name, and exclude when they are confronted with the signifier cut loose, the “mad” dog roaming the alleys of Jerusalem.

In following the dog’s wanderings and encounters, the novel tells a story of a writing gone awry; in effect, we witness the madness in writing given free play. In this context, we can say that the dog is mad because he *is* writing. The dog makes manifest the madness in the text, a possibility that is always there, no matter how stable we may believe the writing to be. Shoshana Felman [1985, 110] argues that representations of madness in literary texts give access to the madness inherent in writing, by showing “the functional possibility of permutation of signifiers between speaker and addressee”. The inherence of madness in language consists in a fluidity that destabilizes the social order of language.

### Between the Generations

“The face of the generation is like the face of a dog,” shouts the preacher, linking the writing on the dog to the generation of youth. Rabbi Gronam’s theme assumes new meaning: “*Pnei hador kipnei hakelev*” works as something of a cryptogram to the text. In it we find encoded the structure of the novel’s relations and forces, from the opening sentence that gives Yitzhak place amid “the sons of the Second *Aliyah*,” to Yitzhak’s inscription of the dog with the words “mad dog,” and on to the dog’s biting of Yitzhak, ending finally with Yitzhak’s sacrificial death, scapegoat for the “sons of the generation.”

The conjunction of the preacher’s indictment of a generation of youth with the random writing produced by one of those young people should prompt an inquiry into the intergenerational world of the novel. The narrative voice in *Only Yesterday* appears to speak out of an alliance with Yitzhak and his youthful peers, the generation of young people who left eastern Europe for Palestine imbued with the romance of Zionism.

This peer sense that the narrator expresses extends into a pervasive discomfort with the older generation. Yitzhak’s intergenerational encounters fall into a virtually paradigmatic alignment of Jerusalem with pious elders and the concept of “*Yerushalayim shel ma’alah*” (the “heavenly Jerusalem”) as opposed to the young men who have come to work the land in its physical being, as we can see in this passage early in the novel:

The old man asked Yitzhak, “What are you doing here?” Said Yitzhak to him, “I am travelling to Erets Yisrael.” The old man was amazed, “And is it the way of a youth to go to the Land of Israel?” Said Yitzhak to him, “To work her land I am going.” The old man became even more amazed. “Is not the land of Israel made up entirely of synagogues and houses of study. Is not the land of Israel exclusively for prayer, so what does working the soil have to do with heavenly requirements?” He had figured out that this young man was from the group of the Zionists who were seeking to tear the land out of its holiness and to make it like all other lands. He began to complain about Yitzhak, in the manner of the elders of Israel of that generation, who looked upon *us* as if *we* had come, heaven forbid, to turn the world to heresy. [Agnon 1968, 5: 32; emphasis added]

Not only does this passage underscore the departure of the youth from the way of the fathers, but as it unfolds, the alliance of the

narrator makes clear the Oedipal rebellion that supplies the generation's identification of itself.

The opening of the novel, in its delineation of Yitzhak's youthful activities and aspirations as a Zionist, suggests the definition of character through ideology, at least superficially. Ideology here organizes character and names the subject on a conscious level. At the same time, in its portrayal of Yitzhak as naive and yet inscrutably death-drawn, *Only Yesterday* demonstrates the opacity of the subject in ways that dissolve the certainty of conceptions based on the transparency of consciousness.<sup>10</sup> The narrative voice tells Yitzhak's story without necessarily comprehending the direction it takes in a manner that suggests the generation's noncomprehension of itself.

The historical record supplements and bears out the sense of an unease in the text that raises questions about any simple romantic version of Zionism. We can remind ourselves of some of the relevant statistics: of the approximately 30,000 Jews who left eastern Europe for Palestine as part of the Second *Aliyah* something like 80% returned to their homelands or continued on to America within weeks of their arrival [Sachar, 1982, 72–73].

In the novel, the dilemma of youth in the Second *Aliyah*, takes the shape of a movement of desire and the attempt to secure an identification with Zionism as signified. Yitzhak is the function of a shift—ideological, geographical, political—from Diaspora to Zion. Lacan describes the consequences of such a shift, when he observes that “the slightest alteration in the relation between man and the signifier. . . changes the whole course of history by modifying the moorings that anchor his being” (1977, 174). Yitzhak attempts to affiliate himself—literally, to become the son of—Zionism. But there is an excess here; there is more going on than can be subsumed into the name, the noun, “*Tsioni*”. In effect, read from the angle of history, the novel records that effort to stabilize the process of signification and anchor reality in the sign.

*Only Yesterday* is motivated by a search for identity through the father that produces a series of substitutions; its underlying premise is the failure of the Diaspora father. From one angle, in acceding to his son's schemes, the Diaspora father fails to provide for his son's passage through the Oedipus. This abdication is signaled early on in a sentence that appears to arise from the father's despair over his son: “A curse has descended on the world, a son does not listen to his father and a father doesn't rule over his son” [1968, 5: 9]. Yitzhak's *aliyah* to Erets Yisrael is financed by a father who deprives himself in order to support his son's visionary scheme. One might conclude

that the father's failure to exercise paternal authority (the paternal "no") makes possible the son's presumed accession to power through adoption of an ideology and emigration to a new land, except that the novel reads as the story of the son's failure to engage and exercise that power. Or, looked at from a different angle through the biblical text of the *aqedah*, the sacrifice of Isaac, to which Yitzhak's name alludes, we could say that the father sends the son out to an *aqedah* from which he fails to rescue him: there is no last-minute substitute for the filial sacrifice that Yitzhak ultimately provides.<sup>11</sup>

Yitzhak's adoption of Zionism suggests a first effort at paternal substitution. The failure of this substitute "father" can be seen in Yitzhak's gradual disenchantment with the Zionist functionaries, so dazzling to him from the distance of exile, whom he meets first in Europe and then in Jaffa. The cafe scenes in which they take him to eat rich cakes express Agnon's characteristic scorn for bureaucrats. Chief among them is Mr. Asqanowitz, whose name derives from *asqan* or "busybody": he displays a map of Erets Yisrael to a delegation of Zionists from the Diaspora in a manner that suggests the land is his to dispose of; at the same time, he pays scarcely any attention to Yitzhak, the would-be pioneer who cannot find work [1968, 5: 62–63].

The desire to rebuild the land of Israel from its destruction and to rebuild oneself through it produces, within the novel's opening paragraph, a biblical vision of the land, laborers returning at dusk to sit, one man under his grapevine, another beneath his fig tree, gathering his wife and sons and daughters around him. This vision of the promised land offers a radiant alternative to the poverty and impotence of the Diaspora family. What is striking here is the language of "return," derived certainly from the heart of Jewish longings for Zion, but coming from a youth for whom this journey constitutes just as much a departure, a most radical break from the world of his father. Yitzhak imagines a "return" to a world he has never known, or more accurately, the "return" frames an attempt to enter a family romance announced on the first page of the novel.

The imaginary nature of his wishes becomes clear later on in the novel when Yitzhak visits Ein Ganim, a *moshav* or cooperative settlement whose workers bring to life Yitzhak's romantic vision, with some significant modifications: "And every day after returning with evening from their work in Petah Tikvah they would go out with their wives and children and would weed out the thorns and raise dust and make bricks" [1968, 5: 169]. These workers hold fast to their vision and integrate it into the world through labor; but while their success

gives pride to onlookers such as Yitzhak, it is also a source of shame. Speaking for Yitzhak and his “brothers,” the narrator observes: “This was the guilt of all of us who came to work the land and did not work it” [1968, 5: 171]. Ein Ganim makes an important statement: it testifies to the actual founding of settlements by Jewish workers and so constitutes a success story in the present tense of the novel. (As such, it plays a role like that of the village of preparation in *A Guest for the Night* and the cooperative farm in *Shira*; each asserts its reality in the social world, but remains somewhat apart from the central conflicts that the novels explore.) Nevertheless, as far as Yitzhak is concerned, Ein Ganim is relegated to a separate sphere akin to the mythic realm inhabited by Reb Yudel Hasid:

[Yitzhak] was reminded of one of those stories that were told of his grandfather Reb Yudel Hasid, that once in the course of his journey for the sake of a dowry (*hakhnasat kalah*) he happened on a village where he passed a Sabbath with one of the 36 righteous men (*lamed-vav tsadiqim*), on whom the world stands. [. . .] And when Yitzhak thought over these matters [the deeds of this righteous man] he smiled and said, And I Yitzhak the grandson of Reb Yudel Hasid passed a weekday not with one righteous man (*nistar*) but with a whole group of the righteous (*nistarim*) on whom the world stands. [Agnon 1968, 5: 173]

Reb Yudel, it should be noted, is the protagonist of Agnon’s novel, *Hakhnasat Kalah* (*The Bridal Canopy*). By associating these workers with Reb Yudel as well as with the legendary “36 *nistarim*,” Yitzhak perceives them as inhabiting a realm separate from the situation in which he finds himself.

*Only Yesterday* is a large and panoramic novel that takes in the social scene of a period in the development of the State of Israel. At the same time, as the account of the *aliyah* of Yitzhak Kummer, it contains its end in its beginning. Consider the quasi-deceptive opening sentence:

Like the rest of our brothers, men of our redemption sons of the Second *Aliyah*, Yitzhak Kummer left his land and his birthplace and his city and went up to the land of Israel to build it from its destruction and to build himself from it. [Agnon 1968, 5:1]

Is Yitzhak in fact representative of “our brothers . . . sons of the Second *Aliyah*?” His end might seem to testify to the contrary.<sup>12</sup> One might well ask, then, if Yitzhak functions as a sacrificial creature for his peers, representative of a tendency denied in them through its

displacement onto him. Representative of a generation's rebellion, he acts out its ambivalence, bringing to the surface the movement of return that is hidden in the generation's separation from its elders.<sup>13</sup> This sort of displacement onto the other amounts to denial, rather than any kind of a working through on the level of the individual psyche or in narrative structure. In fact, this displacement onto Yitzhak may help to explain the unsatisfying nature of the novel's conclusion: to link Yitzhak's death to the end of the drought is to confirm and underscore the primitive expiatory aspect of the plot. But more of that later.

### In Search of the Maternal

Indeed in *Only Yesterday*, one begins to suspect that Yitzhak seeks not so much the missing father as he does absorption into something larger than himself that will relieve him of the challenge of an individuality he has so far resisted. The search for a paternal identification discloses an even deeper drive that threatens to undo the forward motion of the plot. Consider for example the image of Zion that reveals itself in the structure of Yitzhak's expectations. On board ship on the way to the promised land, Yitzhak is asked by an old man: "You have relatives in Erets Yisrael?" Said Yitzhak to him, 'Who needs them, all Yisrael are friends, all the more so in Erets Yisrael'" [1968, 5:33]. Yitzhak's reply is intelligible in terms of the rhetoric of the day, but we should not overlook the manner in which it shapes a primitive set of expectations. Yitzhak's response sidesteps or ignores actual heterogeneity.

The text notes that Yitzhak feels "orphaned" (*meyutam*) on arrival, when he sees the other immigrants meet their relatives [1968, 5: 39]. Yitzhak had been anticipating absorption in the most concrete sense. Strikingly, moreover, his experience of feeling "orphaned" on arrival is succeeded immediately by denial as Yitzhak comments to himself on the young men who take his bags at the harbor, using language that the text designates as *melitsah* or flowery, highly rhetoricized language: "Our mother Zion sent her sons to welcome their brother who has returned to her" [1968, 5: 39]. *Melitsah* serves here to sustain the level of fantasy. Language buffers Yitzhak, although its ironic discrepancy with the situation at hand is not lost on the reader.

"Yitzhak was a man of imaginings/fantasies (*dimyonot*), from the place where his heart desired, he would imagine his imaginings (fan-

tasize his fantasies)” [1968, 5: 1]. Here in this novel the imaginative capacity functions ostensibly in service of the Zionist vision of a rebuilt homeland; nevertheless, the text discloses a movement back to origins that collapses differences and can be discerned even in action that appears to be forward-directed.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, on a geographical axis, the novel appears to utilize a Jaffa-Jerusalem polarity that sets the youthful community of Jaffa against the ingrown traditionalism of the old *yishuv*. At the same time, however, Yitzhak’s journey discloses a psychological mapping that alters that apparent opposition. While Yitzhak’s move from Jaffa to Jerusalem appears to reverse the direction in which he has been traveling and so to signal a major change in milieu and ideology, it is possible to discern here again the drive for incorporation, the wish to regain fusion. The unique status of Jerusalem in Judaism easily justifies its place in the psychic structure that the text generates.

As maternal geography in a literary text, Jerusalem bears comparison to Joyce’s Ireland. Within their respective texts, Dublin and Jerusalem are a form of homeland, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, that is, both homelike and uncanny. (Freud [1919] suggests that the source of the feeling of the “uncanny” or *unheimlich* is the recollection of our original “home” or *heim*, that is, the womb.) Like Agnon, Joyce is aware and wary of place as a threat of absorption, a consciousness he pushes to satire in his characterization of Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In contrast to Stephen’s relationship to Ireland, we can note that the structure of *Bildung* or development in Agnon’s novel places the protagonist in a tension between two poles, two homelands—the Diaspora and Zion, in a complication that the fiction exploits fully. While Stephen Dedalus poises himself for flight into an unknown future out of which he will “forge” an identity for himself and his “race” (with all the ironies that “forge” carries), Yitzhak Kummer turns to a “new” homeland that is at the same time the ancient birthplace of his people. In contrast to Yitzhak who lacks a mother and is born into exile, Stephen is born in the motherland and sees exile as the necessary condition to individuation. He must become father to himself, not only to escape the paternal authority of God and priesthood, but also on what is arguably a deeper or more primary level, to avoid the danger of incorporation into a primitive matrix. Hence, Stephen’s declaration that Ireland is an old sow that eats her farrow.

Agnon gives us not the Joycean effort at stream-of-consciousness, but a more limpid prose and less stressed syntax where, nevertheless, in a manner not unlike Joyce’s, sentence structure and

wording generate the structure that is character. Juxtaposition of two passages, one early and one late in the novel, brings out the constancy of drives that is Yitzhak. Consider Yitzhak's experience on arrival in Erets Yisrael:

That very night Yitzhak learned what he had not learned in all the years, all those years in which he had seen the new Erets Yisrael as *one piece* (*ḥativah aḥat*), that same night he learned that even she (Erets Yisrael) had made herself *pieces and pieces* (*ḥativot ḥativot*). [1968, 5; 55; emphasis added]

Compare this early expression of Yitzhak's wish for union (to be of "one piece") with his brethren in Israel to the moment, much later in the novel, at which he says *Kaddish* at the Western Wall on the occasion of his mother's *yahrzeit* (a moment that is anticipated midway in the novel when Yitzhak's first Sabbath visit to the Wall leaves him feeling like "an infant without sin" [p. 263]):

Now that he had said Kaddish he was drawn closer as if in and of itself to the holy stones. His heart began to pound and his legs to shake. And with the shaking of his legs and the pounding of his heart his voice went out with the voice of all those standing next to the Wall. . . . The stones were swallowed up in the darkness, and all the worshippers became of *one piece* (*ḥativah aḥat*) before the Omnipresent (*hamaqom*, literally 'the place'). [1968, 5; 531; emphasis added]

The moment seems to supply the reunion or reabsorption—into one *piece* or *ḥativah*—that Yitzhak failed to find on first entry into the land of Zion. Indeed Yitzhak is "swallowed up" into corporate unity with other worshippers before God whose appellation here supports further the sense of absorption into place in a concrete sense.<sup>15</sup>

It becomes interesting, in light of this relation to what one might call "maternal presence" (or the lack of it), to look at the sequence of females with whom Yitzhak becomes involved: first Sonia and then Shifra. Semantically, the names underscore the difference between them: the Russian Sonia, of Yaffo's youthful community, suggesting secular studies and Shifra, who is part of Jerusalem's Me'ah She'arim, the clarity of simple piety [Band 1968, 429]. The description of Sonia's education in "general knowledge" (*yedi'ot klaliyot*) suggests a light satire of Enlightenment, as well as a pointed contrast to Yitzhak, who knows only what he has learned in *heder* and in the *beit midrash* [1968, 5: 129]. The relationship of these two young people suggests a comic allegory of secular versus Torah education.



Nevertheless, despite the apparent opposition of “Sonia” to “Shifra,” the sound equivalence of their names may serve to remind us that they occupy the same position in relation to Yitzhak—that of the forbidden woman.<sup>16</sup> When he is with Sonia, Yitzhak thinks constantly of her link to his absent friend and age-peer, Rabinowicz. Curiously, however, the narrative undercuts his obsessive guilt feelings by demonstrating that the link between Sonia and Rabinowicz is more the product of Yitzhak’s *need* to position her as forbidden object, than it is an accurate reflection of the structure of relations between the young men and women of Jaffa. For example, “Even though matters were already finished between Rabinowicz and Sonia, Yitzhak didn’t see himself as clean. . . . [1968, 5: 152]. In a society of peers, the effort to position one of the “brothers” as the forbidding Father lacks persuasiveness.<sup>17</sup>

This aura of the forbidden may well signal a deeper danger than either paternal or fraternal wrath. Two passages suggest the direction in which this danger lies. Before the first kiss with Sonia: “[Yitzhak’s] heart answers and says, You are turning her heart from him[Rabinowicz]” [1968, 5: 126]. But then, right after the kiss: “This was the kiss that was preserved in his mouth from the hour of his mother’s death” [1968, 5: 127]. No wonder Yitzhak needs to maintain Rabinowicz as a rival. The defense precedes the kiss, which produces all those longings for the lost mother and so threatens Yitzhak with collapse into the other. Maintaining a triangular structure, however shaky and unpersuasive, defends the protagonist against his own longings for absorption into a dyadic relationship. (The dangers of the kiss bring to mind the issue of kissing one’s mother in Joyce’s *Portrait*; there, too, the kiss is a nodal point for tensions surrounding relations to the female.)

But there is a second, coincident point about Sonia and the mother’s kiss with which she is associated. There is no such mother. She is not it. Sonia’s desire is metonymic, lighting on Yitzhak, only to pass from him to another, and then on to another, as it had, in fact passed from Rabinowicz to Yitzhak: her kiss is not “a virgin kiss” [1968, 5: 127]. It is only in Yitzhak’s Oedipal fantasy that she *belongs* to Rabinowicz.

Readers have been struck by the pictures of dogs in this novel and it is worth noting the canine images that are associated with Sonia. Sonia’s bed, for example, is “covered with a colored cover on which a yellow dog with a stick in its mouth was embroidered” [1968, 5: 142]; “And from the cover the dog that was on it looked at [Yitzhak] with an angry face” [1968, 5: 148]. The candy box Yitzhak brings to

Sonia pictures a “young girl [*betulah*] . . . [who] bares her teeth and smiles at him” [1968, 5: 151]. Sonia’s kiss is both longed for and feared and can be linked structurally to the dog’s bite. Each threatens to take in and absorb, destroying definitions of relationship that maintain separateness.

These emblematic images speak another language than Yitzhak’s naive idealism, a language in which, as Baruch Kurzweil notes, dogs are associated with women and function as signs of “desire, transgression, primal forces . . . madness” [1982, 221]. Indeed, the common elements of mouth, bite, and teeth suggest the interchangeability of the canine and the female. These dog images appear to signal the dangers found in society without the father. (In the primitive story of *Totem and Taboo*, the father-tyrant rules and all women are forbidden to the sons; Yitzhak seems to operate under some such stricture, even in the absence of the father, primitive or otherwise.)

Given these dangers, Yitzhak must go elsewhere to find what Jaffa has not supplied—the stern father and the Oedipal situation. As part of his move to Jerusalem, Yitzhak turns to Shifra, daughter of the fanatical Reb Faysh of Me’ah She’arim, in a turn away from the outward-directedness of Zionism as movement and social ideology. There is no doubt that Shifra is the forbidden object: the text makes it abundantly clear that a functioning Reb Faysh would never permit Yitzhak to cross his threshold. Furthermore, the interchangeability of Shifra with her mother, in terms of characterization and domestic role, underscores the placement of the daughter in the forbidden.

### Oedipal Inscription Gone Awry

By way of the inscription on the dog, the Oedipal drama is enacted. Remember that the dog has felled Reb Faysh, the most terrifying embodiment of the father imago, and has felled, at least temporarily, Rabbi Gronam Yekum Purkan. Only after the dog’s encounter with Reb Faysh, which results in the prostration of that sternly authoritarian figure, is Yitzhak able to move in and assume a relationship to two interchangeable women, mother and daughter; in effect, he takes the place of the father who lies mute, unable to arrest the young man’s Oedipal triumph. In this respect, then, the dog is the emissary or vehicle for Yitzhak’s aggression against the father.

Shortly after the move to Jerusalem, Yitzhak’s specular iden-

tification with the father can be seen in his taking on the appearance of the pious men of Jerusalem—“Little by little Yitzhak shed his shape and began to imitate his neighbors” [1968, 5: 536]—and his assumption of the masculine position in the household of Reb Faysh. Is this a version of the story Freud tells in *Totem and Taboo*, with Yitzhak as infiltrator into the father’s realm?<sup>18</sup> Anthony Wilden notes that the “specular identification with an ideal, notably with the father, constitutes the subject in the *position* of the real father and thus in an untenable rivalry with him” [1968, 165]. An Oedipal triumph such as Yitzhak’s is intolerable; according to the primitive law of retribution, Yitzhak must pay in kind. And, in fact, Yitzhak is bitten by the dog whose “madness” his inscription has produced; he pays for his transgression by assuming the paralysis of the father.

Thus, the dog is also the vehicle for the other side of this Oedipal drama and that is the re-direction of aggression away from the “father” back to the “son,” that is to say, Yitzhak. In this respect, the dog, overdetermined creature (or text) that he is, becomes the vehicle for Yitzhak’s self-punishment. In effect, one could argue that, by inscribing the dog with the words *kelev meshuga*, Yitzhak has written the *herem* or writ of excommunication casting him out for the worst crime of all—the violation of Oedipal taboos. (Several times, the text compares Yitzhak’s writing on the dog to the old practice of tying excommunications onto dogs, as if to prompt our investigation into the Oedipal significance of such writings.) The dog brings about the change in Yitzhak’s position from *writer* of the *herem*, a role analogous to that of Reb Faysh and the “men of Jerusalem” (*anshe Yerushalayim*), who produce writs of excommunication, to the *object* of the *herem*, or the one who is cast out. His position changes from grammatical subject of the sentence to its object, or from he who writes to the one who is written, in a manner that parallels the odyssey of the text that is the dog. The dog is initially the “text” on which Yitzhak writes, but in its tireless search for a reader, the “text” takes on a more active role and reaches out to bite Yitzhak.

In a study of the Ashkenazic practice of preserving the cloth used during the circumcision ceremony for later use as a binder for the Torah, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to circumcision as the “cut that binds”: “Carrying the child’s name and birthdate, and even the blood of circumcision, the binder symbolically binds the child around the law each time it is used to secure the Torah scroll” [1982, 137]. In *Only Yesterday*, a function analogous to the Torah binder can be discerned in the list—the *pinqas* or communal record—that Reb Alter preserves of the names of all those male infants whom he circumcised in Yitzhak’s hometown.

As *mohel*, Reb Alter has the responsibility to inscribe Yitzhak in a list, thereby imposing the law that brings him into community. Circumcision signifies the covenant with a heavenly Father and occurs under the authorization of the earthly father, representative of the Law. As the “cut that binds,” it names the subject and heralds his entry into an existing network of signifiers. Or, more accurately, since it occurs eight days after birth, it heralds the power and authority of the all-pervasive symbolic order to which the *infans* will gain access through the acquisition of speech and acquiescence to the law of the Father. (In this sense, “family” serves as a “relay point” between subjectivity and culture [Silverman 1983, 130].)

Circumcision, of course, constitutes a *modified* castration; it constitutes the “token” that is exacted as the cost of membership in the social order. Freud comments on the unconscious equation of circumcision with castration and sees this as one of the causes of [western] anti-Semitism” [1910, 95–96]; Lacan shows the movement from castration to the social practice of circumcision, at once a neutralization, an appropriation and an acting out of the aggressivity in castration [1977, 11ff., 199].

From one angle, the dog’s bite undoes the ties that circumcision initiates. If circumcision is the inscription of the name of the Father in the flesh of the son, the dog’s bite is its opposite, a perverse mirroring that the text does not suppress. It is the consequence of an inscription that occurs in a moment of suspension of the Law in which the utter randomness of writing surfaces. Inscription and bite combine to exclude Yitzhak from community, disqualifying him from the social role to which marriage to Shifra, an event that immediately precedes the dog’s bite, has admitted him. (From another angle, one could argue that the dog’s bite, as an imitation of circumcision, underscores the aggressivity contained in the ritual.)

After the start of his illness, Yitzhak’s condition is brought to the attention of Reb Alter by his wife who dreams that Yitzhak’s mother came to her expressing fear that her son had fallen victim to “savage anger” (*haron af*)—a phrase that carries the flavor of paternal wrath, bringing to mind not only its scriptural uses, but also the father-tyrant of *Totem and Taboo*. Reb Alter’s wife, Hinda Pu’ah, reports this dream to her husband, thinking that he “will laugh at her” (*yitzhaq lah*): the verb *yitzhaq* or “will laugh” is of course the same as Yitzhak’s name, echoing parodically the Biblical etymology for the naming of Isaac (Gen. 18:12). Rather than *laugh*, however, Reb Alter confirms his wife’s worries by telling her that on his list—his *pin-qas*—of those he has circumcised, the letters of Yitzhak’s name have begun to fade and become illegible (*nitashitsu*) [1968, 5: 602].

Reb Alter's list of those he circumcised in Yitzhak's eastern European hometown constitutes a writing *into* community, insofar as circumcision, the "cut that binds" in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's phrase, initiates the inscription of Jewish males into community. This contrasts with the writing *out of* community that we see in the writing on the dog, an inscription that combines with the dog's bite to reverse the rite of circumcision, thus constituting the cut that severs, excluding Yitzhak from the community he entered with circumcision. This writing out of community invokes not only the *aqedah*, as Shaked, Band and others point out, but also the whole of God's promise to Abraham of nationhood. Through Reb Alter's reference to an effaced writing—the fading of Yitzhak's name on his list—the novel comments on itself, in a seemingly hallucinatory moment that epitomizes the structure of its relations. One inscription writes out another in a struggle for legibility for which Yitzhak is literally the locus.

Within the structures that the text generates, Yitzhak has acted out the forbidden; his accession to death is a sacrifice, whose purpose is to "restore" the power of the Father. This can be compared with dramas of filial sacrifice in Kafka's stories: while Gregor Samsa is swept out with the trash, his death takes its place in a sacrificial scheme insofar as it is linked with the sudden burst of spring that brings new life to the family. This concluding note of redemption and renewal in Kafka's "Metamorphosis" parallels the onset of rains in *Only Yesterday* following Yitzhak's death: we can see that Gregor's assumption of guilt, like Yitzhak's, has to do with no sin of his own, beyond entrapment in the web of the Oedipal.<sup>19</sup> These narratives suggest forms of Oedipal guilt for which no atonement is possible. Sons pay tribute with their lives, repaying the debt of a rebellion whose impact is cosmic as much as it is imaginary.

The inherence of this guilt in narrative structure suggests, from a psychoanalytic point of view, something like the refusal of the child to relinquish the primitive desire to be the phallus for the mother, a refusal that makes every encounter with the paternal a struggle to the death.<sup>20</sup> The developmental alternative to these savage dramas comes about through the normalization of the Oedipus complex: the child accepts that he cannot *literally* take the place of the father; through this accession to the law of the Father, the child accepts what amounts to "symbolic castration" and identifies with the *role* or *function* of the father.

In contrast, literature makes available to us a vicarious living out of the Oedipus in its more radical form. Yitzhak's end testifies to a hidden but persistent insistence on the radical nature of his trans-

gression, which in effect resists any modification or integration.<sup>21</sup> It is this insistence, buried in the structure of the text, that makes necessary the death-as-tribute-to-the-father to which Yitzhak submits. Read back into history, then, the novel traces the dilemma of a generation whose impulse to self-realization, whether on an individual or a national level, carried with it dangerous resonances of early struggles.

In Sophocles' rendition of the myth, Oedipus survives the punishment that we may understand to be castration; he offers himself to the people of Thebes as a horrible example, but in essence a therapeutic one: "Approach and deign to touch me for all my wretchedness, and do not fear. / No man but I can bear my evil doom" (11. 1413–15). In telling the townspeople his story, whether or not they accept it, Oedipus gains access to a dimension of being beyond simple commission of the crime: he has accepted his guilt, but he can make a claim to participation in the social order based on that acceptance and the consequent possibility of integration. In *Only Yesterday*, as in Kafka's "Metamorphosis," the split between the fate of the protagonist and the life of the collective goes unaddressed and unresolved; it remains to the reader to piece together the traces of an expiatory plot structure and to consider the place of that drama in human life.

The severity of Yitzhak's end is offset by the survival of the social world and, unpersuasively perhaps, by the novel's closing reference to a projected sequel that will tell of the "deeds of the rest of our friends" [1968, 5: 607]. Another attempt to offset the grimness of the conclusion can be seen in a discarded final chapter to the novel that contained, by way of "comfort," the meeting of the daughter of Yitzhak and Shifra with the son of Sonia and Yarkoni [Shaked 1971]. (We can keep in mind also the special case of the *moshav* Ein Ganim, a compelling instance of the capacity of workers to integrate their collective vision into the world, but one that is framed and set off from the dilemma of Yitzhak and friends.)

The only significant alternatives that the text offers can be seen in those figures, who have in one way or another, established distance from women as well as social movements. One figure who appears in the novel, but possesses also an identity outside the text, is Y. H. Brenner who is noteworthy in this appearance for his cynicism, clear-sightedness and simplicity. There are several minor but significant characters who posit the alternative of distance as a solution to the madness of unstructured fluctuation between extremes: they include the solitary Leichtfuss, who is marked by his isolation and self-sufficiency, and the artist Blaukopf, who draws a separation

(*matah vilon*) in order to practice his art. Kurzweil [1982] notes that dogs tend to be found in the company of the solitary figures in the novel; these figures rule over both dogs and women with a stern hand and so are not threatened by either. In contrast, Yitzhak flees from solitude and has bad luck with dogs and women.

In this roster of minor characters, Arzaf is the extreme of the isolationist tendency: his professional activities as a taxidermist testify to his lack of relationship to other creatures [1968, 5: 200–221, 224]. The deadliness of Arzaf's touch and the deathly seductiveness of his appeal to Balak make clear the sinister nature of the alternative he offers.<sup>22</sup> If it is Yitzhak's fate to succumb to the writing on the dog, to be the sacrifice to his own inscription, then Arzaf stands at the opposite extreme, to the extent of a monstrous detachment signified by the taxidermy he practices. Seducing animals into his studio with the delusory promise of permanence, he practices a craft that can be read as an extreme reification of the other.

A concluding note on writing. As an instrument of communication, writing possesses social function: it is meant to define, delineate, and transmit a message from sender to receiver. That transmission is predicated on the reliable definition of its constituent elements, including the differentiation between self and other that underlies the relationship of sender and receiver. Nevertheless that intersubjective structure is not as stable as one might assume. Jacques Lacan observes that "one can speak of the code only if it is already the code of the Other, and that is something quite different from what is in question in the message, since it is from this code that the subject is constituted, which means that it is from the Other that the subject receives even the message that he emits" [1977, 305]. From this, we may understand that writing itself, as an inter- and intra-subjective medium, contains the madness that is aberrance or the confusion of a "reliable" structure of communication. The madness *in* writing breaks down the distinctions it is meant to maintain. Just as Shoshana Felman takes representations of madness in literature to signal a "radical ambiguity of the inside and the outside, insofar as this ambiguity escapes the speaking subjects" [1985, 13], so my approach has been to take representations of writing in the text as nodal points for study of the interaction of linguistic and psychic structure that is the text. Madness brings forward indeterminacies and instabilities that are inherent in writing as well as in subjectivity, but might be overlooked in the interests of more peaceable readings.

As a novel, *Only Yesterday* contains, reverberates with, and may even be undone by the writings contained within it. Were we to catalogue these writings, we might note the contrast between Yitzhak as *tsabah* or housepainter whose job it is to “make surfaces nice” and the dog who *bites* Yitzhak, penetrating the surface in a biting aimed at getting at the truth. This contrast between superficial embellishment and deeper penetration is supported by the difference in the approaches of Yitzhak and Balak to the central writing that is the inscription of the dog. Yitzhak dismisses the writing on the dog: “And does everything that is written oblige us to believe it” [1968, 5: 589], but Balak expresses a much larger expectation as he searches for Yitzhak in order to decode the writing on his back: “If I bite him, the truth drips and flows from him.” Interestingly, the text goes on to note that just as the mythical Great Dog bites the sky to bring blessed rains, so Balak bites Yitzhak to get truth [1968, 5: 593]. This folkloristic analogy expresses a primitive wish for oral incorporation of the desired object; on the level of primitive thought, that expectation parallels the connection between Yitzhak’s death and the coming of the rain.

Yitzhak never masters the discourses—Zionism, the piety of *anshe Yerushalayim* (the men of Jerusalem)—to which he attempts to affiliate himself. His writing on the dog, an imitation of the writing of the father, produces a comedy-drama of the instability of the sign that opens up the drama of subjectivity to the text at-large.<sup>23</sup>

Just before writing on the dog, Yitzhak carries out one of the commissions that have earned him a good reputation for colors that do not fade [1968, 5:274]. This is ornamental writing, writing on command for a salary; until this point, Yitzhak has functioned as the instrument of others’ intentionality. With the seductive appearance of the dog as potential text, the question of intention disappears into the union of hand and brush. The writing on the dog produces a “text” that is the inversion of the sort of socially acceptable sign painting Yitzhak has been doing: it exchanges the clear and distinct colors of the commissioned writing for the indeterminacy of the dog’s coloring—“maybe white maybe brown maybe yellow”—suggesting reversibility of the text and its other.

There is a startling similarity between the moment at which Yitzhak writes on the dog and the moment at which the dog bites Yitzhak. Each involves loss of control, self-consciousness; each is a moment of possession, transport beyond the objective sense of the “I.” These moments supply the sense of being of a piece, *ḥativah aḥat*



instead of *ḥativot ḥativot*, *nivlah* or swallowed up in an experience of boundary loss. Each is a moment of writing (as well as a moment *in* the writing) in which the stable distinctions writing is supposed to maintain break down. Such moments of madness or excess collapse distinctions between subject and object, demonstrating the danger of too much closeness, whereas sanity, or the reasonable guarantee of a stable writing, assumes a “correct” distance.<sup>24</sup> In these moments, intersubjective structure collapses, with the consequent undoing of the subjectivity that has been formed through the family. The moments of excess in the novel are atoned for or repressed in the closure of the novel whose rigid Oedipal scheme of filial sacrifice attempts to contain the madness in the writing.

## Chapter 7.

1. See for example, Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* [1923a]: “The broad general outcome of the sexual phase dominated by the Oedipus complex may, therefore, be taken to be the forming of a precipitate in the ego, consisting of these two identifications [with parental imagos] in some way united with each other. This modification of the ego retains its special position; it confronts the other contents of the ego as an ego ideal or superego” [p. 34].

2. R. C. Davis uses *The Odyssey* to offer a model of narrative based on the son’s search for a missing father; this lack sets up the condition for narrative by provoking the desire of the son for the father and prompting the inauguration of discourse [1981, 7, 13, 25].

3. Baruch Kurzweil considers *Only Yesterday* to be “the most important and successful effort in the area of the social novel in our new literature” [1982, 216]. See also Gershon Shaked, [1983, v. 2: 206; and 1989, 147]. Most recently, the research of Avraham Holtz demonstrates Agnon’s use of documentary materials in the composition of the novel, so much so that characters often quote directly from “contemporary journals, memoirs, and other primary historical materials” [1989, 630]. *Tmol Shilshom* remains as yet untranslated. Translations are my own and refer to Volume 5 in *Kol Sipurav* [*The Collected Stories*].

4. Hillel Barzel, for example, notes that a mad dog will bite and kill; he observes that “the dog in the tradition of Israel is an animal connected to prey and impurity . . . the dog, as Agnon understood from his childhood, in contrast to the cat or the rooster, for example, was known to be an outdoors creature, not a domestic animal” [1972, 223].

5. While Avraham Holtz cites the sources for Agnon’s description of Yitzhak’s symptoms, he acknowledges that the dog is never actually identified as rabid [1989, 633–34].

6. Rabbi Gronam’s source text: Sanhedrin 97a: “It has been taught, R. Judah said: In the generation when the son of David comes, the house of assembly will be for harlots, Galilee in ruins, Gablan lie desolate, the border inhabitants wander about from city to city, receiving no hospitality, the wisdom of scribes in disfavour, God-fearing men despised, people [the face of the generation] be dog-faced, and truth entirely lacking, [ . . . ] It has been taught: R. Nehorai said: In the generation when Messiah comes, young men will insult the old, and old men will stand before the young [to give them honour]; daughters will rise up against their mothers, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law. The people shall be dog-faced, and a son will not be abashed in his father’s presence.”

7. There is further satire in Rabbi Gronam's name: "*Yekum purkan*" is an Aramaic phrase from the liturgy, meaning "May salvation arise . . ."

8. My thanks to Professor Avraham Holtz for sharing with me a copy of the actual writ of excommunication that is the source for this passage.

9. Reb Faysh's affliction is termed *shittuq*, a clinical label for paralysis [Holtz, 1989], but also a noun from the root *sh-t-q*, "to silence."

10. In "Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire," Jacques Lacan writes: "The promotion of consciousness as being essential to the subject in the historical after-effects of the Cartesian *cogito* is for me the deceptive accentuation of the transparency of the I in action at the expense of the opacity of the signifier that determines the I" [1977, 307]. Edward S. Casey and J. Melvin Woody gloss Lacan to suggest the "essential opacity of the 'I' in contrast with the putative clarity of consciousness" [1983, 97].

11. See Gershon Shaked's discussion of the *aqedah* in this context; [1983, 207].

12. Baruch Kurzweil notes Yitzhak's *difference* from his peers insofar as he inhabits the world of his fathers, Reb Yudel Hasid and his townsman Reb Alter, while also engaging in the "liberated" new lifestyle of his peers [1982, 22].

13. Compare with Shaked's analysis of "*Shevu'at emunim*" ("Betrothed"): he remarks the sensitivity with which Agnon "homed in on a neurosis typical of an entire society: the Zionist society of young immigrants who both sought rebirth and thirsted for death. Commanded to set out for new world, they still yearned to return to the bosom of the great mother" [1987a, 51].

14. This regressive tendency within the forward movement of plot suggests to me something of a basis for a psychoanalytic conception of plot, along the lines of that developed by Peter Brooks. Brooks notes that narrative structure is such that "the end is a time before the beginning," that is to say, the end presupposes the beginning. Drawing on Freud's speculation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that "an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" and further that "the aim of all life is death," Brooks conceptualizes plot, the action in the narrative, as a "kind of divergence or deviance, a postponement in the discharge which leads back to the inanimate" [1982, 291]. From this perspective, "ends (death, quiescence, non-narratibility)" are set against "beginnings (Eros, stimulation into tension, the desire of narrative) in a manner that necessitates the middle as *detour*, as struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque in the dilatory space of the text" [pp. 291, 295]. The story of Yitzhak Kummer fits into this abstract formulation. Ostensibly seeking to build and be rebuilt through work on the land, Yitzhak's efforts can be read at the same time as a drive to return to origins.

15. The moment supplies the oceanic feeling Freud's friend cites as a mainspring of religious feeling, but places it under the auspices of the Father, so satisfying what Freud saw to be the human need—infantile and Oedipal—which gives rise to religion. See chapter one of *Civilization and its Discontents*. This moment in *Only Yesterday* can be compared with the passage in *A Guest for the Night* in which the Guest enters the *beit midrash* to study in memory of his father and experiences boundary loss and the feeling of absorption into something larger than himself. (See chapter 5.)

16. Gershon Shaked [1989, 147] observes that Yitzhak is caught between Sonya and Shifra, or between betrayal of his mother and return to the mother.

17. For a discussion of triangles in Agnon, see David Aberbach, 1984, chapter 2.

18. *Totem and Taboo* figures for Jacques Lacan as “the Freudian myth . . . the sole example of a full-fledged myth to have emerged in our historical age” [1982, 42].

19. The Officer of “In the Penal Colony,” makes a gift of himself to the machine that is the instrument of law, the “Old Law” according to which guilt is never to be doubted. The machine, of course, is a writing machine (see chapter 2) that can be said to inscribe the name of the Father in a punishment which the “son” does not survive. And of course, we should not forget Josef K's comment on his own death: “‘Like a dog!’ he said; it was as if the shame of it must outlive him” [1964, 286]. Max Brod cites the point in *Letter to his Father* at which Franz Kafka connects his use of the phrase to the infinite sense of guilt created in him by his father [Brod 1960, 24]. *Letter to his Father*: “Here, it is enough to remind you of early days. I had lost my self-confidence where you were concerned, and in its place had developed a boundless sense of guilt. (In recollection of the boundlessness I once wrote of someone, accurately, ‘He is afraid the shame will outlive him, even.’)” [Kafka 1966, 73].

20. “We will take *Verwerfung*, then to be *foreclosure* of the signifier. To the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is called—we shall see how—may correspond in the Other, then, a mere hole, which by the inadequacy of the metaphoric effect will provoke a corresponding hole at the place of the phallic signification” [Lacan 1977, 201]. The concept of foreclosure or *Verwerfung* is one that Jacques Lacan takes from Sigmund Freud (Cf. Lacan 1977, 201, 217). John P. Muller offers this explanation of the concept: “In psychotic development castration is foreclosed: the child remains in a dual, symbiotic union with the mother in which the child identifies with being the all-fulfilling object of the mother's desire. . . . In attempting to *be* the imaginary phallus or completion of the mother the child rejects the limits implied by castration” [1983, 23].

21. For example, a well-meaning friend of Yitzhak's takes a *minyán* or quorum to the Western Wall to recite psalms and a particular verse mentioning a dog ten times, in what can be seen as an effort to weave Yitzhak back into the fabric of Jerusalem, but his effort does not offset the savage text of madness [1968, 5: 604].

22. David Aberbach views Arzaf's total dedication to his "art" as evidence of a "schizoid detachment" that separates him from people while preserving his sanity; he notes that Arzaf's name means "hellebore," the name of a plant used in antiquity to cure insanity [1984, 135].

23. "Madness is not the *origin* of (the) writing, the *cause* of meaning, but an *effect of discourse*—as is the subject himself" [Felman 1985, 98].

24. See Jacques Lacan, 1977, pp. 246–47 on "correct distance."

## Chapter 8.

1. The first three books, approximately 160 pages, are more or less complete, while part 4 is a fragment of fifty pages. Agnon began to publish portions of *Shira* from 1948 on in the yearbook of the newspaper *Ha'arets* [Schocken 1978, 227]. In the present discussion, reference is made first to the 1989 translation of *Shira*, then to the 1979 Schocken edition of the original. In some instances, translations have been modified.

2. The manuscript in the archive of the Jewish National and University Library is a text that incorporates segments of the early *Ha'arets* version of *Shira*, showing the writer's handwritten revisions, deletions and emendations as a kind of embroidery that shows the text in process.

3. Derrida [1981, 3] remarks the tension between writing and the book: "the book form alone can no longer settle . . . the case of those writing processes which, in *practically* questioning that form, must also dismantle it."

4. The 1948 publication of this section of the novel in *Ha'arets* uses a sequence of sentences to present Shira's empathic relationship to the birthing women ("as if she were sick or giving birth"), Herbst's wish to avoid looking at her, and the subsequent appearance of the beggar. Agnon's handwritten revisions show the development of the final version whose syntactic economy brings about the suggestive condensation I have noted. This entire scene with the beggar in the waiting room is subjected to a revision that simplifies syntax, while rendering intersubjective boundaries more ambiguous. In addition, verbs are simplified to become more concrete and powerful; for example, Herbst "sat and was silent" is revised to Herbst "muzzled