

# THE INFRAHUMAN

Animality in  
Modern Jewish Literature

NOAM PINES

**SUNY**  
P R E S S

Cover art: Vincent van Gogh, *Old Nag*, 1883

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## 5 AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

### Responses to the Infrahuman in the Works of S. Y. Agnon and Paul Celan

THE CHALLENGES THAT THE WORK of Kafka posed for subsequent literary and critical endeavors, in its detachment of the infrahuman from a specifically Jewish frame of reference, coincided with the attempt to rethink the essence of the human in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Adorno's "Notes on Kafka" (1953) is emblematic of this juncture in which Kafka's work was interpreted as a "trial run of a model of dehumanization,"<sup>1</sup> foreshadowing the horrors of Auschwitz but also exemplifying the detrimental effects of commodification, reification, and alienation to which the individual is subjected in industrial-capitalist society. In what follows I will examine the ways in which two prominent Jewish authors have appropriated Kafka's legacy in their writings, albeit in the service of two different projects. Both authors incorporated the infrahuman into their work in order to chart the prospects for an assessment of the humanity of the Jew, indeed of humanity in general, in the aftermath of historical catastrophe. In the novel *Temol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*, 1945), S. Y. Agnon invokes the figure of an investigating dog as an allegory for the prospective failure of Zionism, whereas Paul Celan in his "Meridian" speech (1960) names the Kafkaesque attentiveness to the creaturely as a form of poetic openness toward the "altogether Other."<sup>2</sup> Despite their different trajectories, the texts converge in a preoccupation with the relationship between the artificial and the creaturely, a relationship that bears directly on the changed role of literature after Auschwitz.

S. Y. AGNON'S HISTORICAL NOVEL, *Temol Shilshom*, tells the story of a young man, Isaac Kumer, who immigrated to Palestine during the first decade of the twentieth century. Kumer is part of the second *Aliya*, the second wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine—at the time an underdeveloped southern Syrian province under Ottoman rule. The Jewish settlers

who took part in the second *Aliya* were secular idealist Zionists who came to work the soil and revive Hebrew language and labor in the Land of Israel. A fervent Zionist, Isaac also dreams of realizing such ideals. Coming from a poor Jewish family in eastern Galicia (a former part of Poland incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century), he makes his way to Palestine by train and ship. However, upon reaching Palestine he soon discovers that agricultural work is impossible to come by, since the immigrants of the first *Aliya*, who had become land-owning farmers in new Jewish settlements, preferred cheap Arab labor over the more expensive and inexperienced Jewish labor. Brought to the brink of starvation by lack of work, Isaac is forced to abandon his dream of labor Zionism and instead takes up a job as a house painter. Living in Jaffa, he gives up his traditional way of life and develops an intimate relationship with Sonya, a Russian girl who later rejects him. Sonya's rejection prompts Isaac to move to Jerusalem, where he gradually becomes involved in the ultra-orthodox, anti-Zionist community of the old *Yishuv*.

The story of Kumer's immigration to Palestine, his dream of becoming a tiller of the soil, his failure to achieve his dream, his adaptation to the harsh realities of life in Palestine, the sense of shame resulting from his failure, and his subsequent attempt to join the Jewish orthodox community in Jerusalem serve as the background against which life in pre-mandatory Palestine unfolds in the novel in vivid detail. Through Kumer's encounters with the various inhabitants of the land, the reader is confronted with a rich and complex weave of opinions, beliefs, and behaviors that document the collective experiences of the generation of the second *Aliya*. Yet *Only Yesterday* is not just a historical novel, but a "master-novel" that, according to Boaz Arpaly, incorporates several models and fundamental aspects of the modern European novel.<sup>3</sup> Behind the novel's seemingly realistic façade lies a complex web of ambiguous meanings, subplots, and literary constructs in which the storyline is continuously unraveled and recast anew. Consequently, this literary work has drawn the attention of all major Hebrew literary critics, including Baruch Kurzweil, Dov Sadan, Dan Miron, Benjamin Harshav, Robert Alter, and Amos Oz, among others.

The most striking enigma offered in the novel, which has puzzled critics for decades, concerns the appearance of the dog Balak and his relation to

Isaac Kumer. Balak is a street dog on whose back Kumer inscribes the words “mad dog.” Balak is then brutally chased away from his native Meah Shearim (the ultra-orthodox quarter in Jerusalem) by Jews who read the Hebrew inscription on his back. He roams about Jerusalem among non-Jews looking for shelter, but eventually contracts rabies, returns to Meah Shearim, and bites Isaac, who consequently dies a terrible death. Balak’s appearance in the novel is striking because it fractures the historical, realistic continuity that has been established throughout the first two hundred pages, plunging the plot quite unexpectedly into the strange and foreign world of a dog, an allegorical realm that has been interpreted alternatively as emblematic of Zionism, or of Isaac’s repressed sexuality, or of Jewish exile, or of a destructive demonic force, and so on.

Significantly, Balak is identified right from the outset as a “stray dog” or a “street dog” (*kelev hutzot*) in the fateful encounter with Isaac: “he [Isaac] chanced on a stray dog, with short ears, a sharp nose, a stub of a tail, and hair that looked maybe white or maybe brown or maybe yellow, one of those dogs who roamed around Jerusalem until the English entered the Land.”<sup>24</sup> The reference to street dogs in the historical context of pre-mandatory Palestine is by no means self-evident. It alludes to the fact that prior to British rule there was no existing Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Palestine. The British, who brought with them Western standards of animal welfare, founded the JSPCA (Jerusalem Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), an organization that still exists today. Without an animal-protection society to guarantee a modicum of animal rights, Balak would have been entirely exposed to wanton cruelty. Thus, we are told that the case of Balak has drawn the attention of Western anthropologists, who claim that “the Jews of Palestine are to be condemned . . . they throw big stones at the dog and chase him furiously. . . . But this should be called to the attention of the SPCA [*tsa’ar ba’alei hayim*], if there is such a society in the Oriental lands, so that they may pay heed to this brutal custom” (OY, 490; translation modified). Living exposed and unprotected on the margins of society, Balak resembles Abramovitsh’s *kliatshe* as an easy victim of persecution and abuse. However, the possibility that the figure of Balak may unequivocally serve as an allegory for diasporic Jewish life is ruled out in the text itself, which makes an explicit reference to Abramovitsh’s *Di kliatshe*:

When the Jerusalem newspapers reached Jaffa, Jaffa thought that dog was a parable, like Mendele's horse and other stories of livestock and animals and birds which a person reads for pleasure, and if he's intelligent, he applies his intelligence to the moral. The people of Jaffa, who are all intelligent, applied their intelligence to that, but they didn't know who they were against. This one says, There's something to this; and that one says, We have to derive the implicit from the explicit. But what is explicit here no one explained. Meanwhile, opinions were divided, and there were as many opinions as there were inhabitants of the city. (OY, 485)

As the "intelligent" people of Jaffa read about Balak's exploits, they are tempted to ascribe them an allegorical meaning. But Balak's existence, as the above-quoted passage asserts, is ultimately irreducible, testifying to the unbridgeable gap between "significance" and "physical nature," the gap that serves as the locus of the inhuman. The indeterminacy of meaning associated with the figure of the dog does not necessarily rule out in advance a variety of allegorical interpretations, but rather suspends them in the spatial dimension of the allegory. In this sense, the figure of Balak bears a distinctive structural resemblance to the figure of Kafka's dog in the "Investigations of a Dog." Indeed, in *Only Yesterday* Agnon seems to have adopted the narrative strategy that Kafka had developed in the "Investigations," which revolves on a dog's unwitting involvement in the human world. In the perspective of the dog, the human world appears as an aggregate of inexplicable phenomena to which he can find no satisfying explanation—hence the need for "investigations." The essential disruption in the life of Kafka's dog, which occurs with the experience of the "music dogs," is paralleled in *Only Yesterday* by the inscription of the words "mad dog" on Balak's back.

And when the dog came to Meah Shearim and jumped to his hole and wanted to sit quietly and rest from his suffering, all of Meah Shearim was shocked, and all those who walk on two legs, men, women, and children, started running in panic. The dog thought they were running to hear a sermon from the preacher. And since everyone ran, the dog thought that Rabbi Grunam May-Salvation-Arise was preaching, for his sermons were all the rage in Jerusalem . . .

He too, that is, the dog, began running, like dogs who, if they see human beings running, they immediately run after them. As soon as he ran he knew he was mistaken. There is no Reb Grunam here and no sermon, but there is something here that never had been before. He sniffed a little here and a little there and nothing came into his nose. He raised his voice and asked, Where are the feet going? And everyone who heard his voice and saw him and the writing on his back picked up his feet and fled, wailing, Crazy dog, crazy dog. When there are many voices screaming at once, they can't be heard, but a wail added to them is heard. That wail went from one end of Meah Shearim to the other, and the farther it went, the less it was understood. (OY, 288–89)

From this point on, the focus will be placed on Balak's repeated "investigations" aimed at deciphering the meaning of the written signs on his back. To him, these signs that carry such palpable consequences as brutal expulsion and exile appear as hieroglyphs. That is, Balak recognizes the basic signifying function of the marks, but the reference eludes him:

He thrust his head toward his back, as he was accustomed to do because of the fleas. And he saw strange signs. It came to him that those signs were the handiwork of the owner of the instrument . . . At that moment, all his suffering was naught compared to the search for truth. And once again he turned his head back to see what were those signs and what was that truth. But all his pains were in vain because he couldn't read. He was amazed and stunned, Everyone who sees me knows the truth about me, and I, who possess the truth itself, I don't know what it is. He shouted loud and long, Hav Hav Hav, this truth, what is it? . . . Truth has a covenant, that all who seek it seek the whole truth. Balak too. Since he paid heed to the truth he wasn't content with some of it and sought to know the whole truth. He stood before the legs of the principal and called out, Hav Hav Hav, give me the interpretation of things, give me the true truth. The janitor came out and saw the dog and what was written on his back. He picked up his feet and ran away. Said Balak, He knows the truth, he knows the truth, but what shall I do since he ran away

with it. And Balak was still far from the truth, at any rate investigating the truth was a bit of consolation for his sorrow. (OY, 302–4; translation modified)

In a peculiar inversion of the opaqueness of the figure of the dog from a human perspective, the human world and its products appear equally enigmatic from the perspective of the dog. Denied access to the meaning of the signs that encapsulate the truth of his existence and the reason for his expulsion, Balak remains in a state of non-knowledge, constantly running up against a meaning that remains undisclosed. Just as in Kafka's work, in *Only Yesterday* this immersion in undisclosedness of meaning emerges as the hallmark of the inhuman. For Balak, not knowing is experienced as an oppressive, at times even unbearable distress that can be temporarily alleviated only by the prospect of the investigations, which defer the discovery of truth to a later point in time. The distress associated with the state of not knowing finds expression in the dog's barks, which are phonetically written in Hebrew as "hav, hav, hav." But "hav" in Hebrew also means "give," and thus the dog's frantic barks become indistinguishable from an urgent request for the disclosure of meaning. The barks provide a literal manifestation for Deleuze and Guattari's designation of "an asignifying intensive utilization of language"<sup>5</sup> in which the meaningful word merges with the meaningless sound. The dog's request reads in Hebrew as follows: "hav, hav, hav, give [hav] me the interpretation of things, give [hav] me the truth."

The thirst for truth that goes unanswered and the lingering immersion in an undisclosedness of meaning eventually give rise to a pervasive melancholy affect that emerges from the unresolvable gap between meaning and letter, "significance" and "physical nature." The first indication of melancholia takes place when Balak intrudes on the young lovers sitting on the rocks next to the Bukharan Houses:

This one fled here and that one fled there and the rocks once again stood like rocks of the wilderness with no person and no love. And the dog too stood like a stone with no love and no person. But amazement spread over his face and a question twitched in his mouth and hung on his tongue, What is this, wherever human beings look at him, there is either stoning or fleeing. His solitude struck him and he was sad. (OY, 291)



The stone, in its association here with “no love and no person,” is emblematic of the telluric aspects of melancholia, which has long been identified, in accordance with a Pythagorean tradition, with the element of earth.<sup>6</sup> Benjamin has expounded on this association between melancholia and the coldness and dryness of stone in his *Trauerspiel* essay by observing that “in the inert mass there is a reference to the genuinely theological conception of the melancholic, which is to be found in one of the seven deadly sins. This is *acedia*, dullness of the heart, or sloth.”<sup>7</sup> As an emblematic term, the stone represents the subjection of the melancholic to abject matter and to earthly influences that are entirely deaf “to the voice of revelation”<sup>8</sup> and acknowledge no higher law than the world of earthly things.

In this constellation, the figure of the dog, too, appears as a key association with a state of melancholia, as it comes to represent “sadness with regard to the essential spiritual good of man, that is, to the particular spiritual dignity that had been conferred on him by God.”<sup>9</sup> Melancholia implies a collapse into the self, a fall into self-absorption in which the human being turns his back on God and the cosmic order so as to indulge in sinful contemplation of earthly goods. In this depraved state, the fundamental equivalence between human and animal existence is revealed. Melancholia, as Benjamin remarked, is “the most genuinely creaturely of the contemplative impulses, and it has always been noticed that its power need be no less in the gaze of a dog than in the attitude of a pensive genius.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the dog was a popular emblem of melancholia, and was used to represent the melancholic attachment to the dimension of the earthly in Renaissance and Baroque art.<sup>11</sup>

In *Only Yesterday*, two other characters apart from Balak succumb to the effects of melancholia: Reb Fayesh and Isaac Kumer. Both, indeed, are animalized. Isaac contracts rabies and is thus turned into a dog, whereas Fayesh, who collapses after being frightened out of his wits by Balak in the dead of night, comes to resemble an animal in his debilitated state:

Balak saw the downfall of that man and was stunned, What is the matter? Just a little while ago, he was walking around on two legs and now he’s down on four. I’ll go and smell him, maybe the creature isn’t a human, or maybe he needs help and I’ll be kind to him” (OY, 325–26).

Reduced to a miserable four-legged state, Fayesh no longer cares about the Torah and the Commandments. All that remains of him is pure bodily existence: “Nothing was left but this body sunk in pillows and blankets and sweating” (OY, 328). As they suffer from melancholia, Fayesh and Kumer are also identified with stones. Fayesh spends his days lying in bed “like a silent stone and has no control over his limbs, his hands and his tongue don’t obey him, and the rest of his body also seems removed from the world” (OY, 326). Isaac, too, is compared to a stone toward the end of the novel, as he seeks a home in the ultra-orthodox community of Meah Shearim. He is described as a sad orphan, “a child solitary as a stone in the field” (OY, 581). In both cases, then, the melancholy state of solitude and detachment from the world is associated with animality and stone-like qualities.

In *Only Yesterday*, melancholia comes to play a role similar to that of shame in Kafka’s stories, namely, as the emotional and psychological tonality intimately associated with the infrahuman. However, melancholia also encapsulates a latent threat, namely, that of subjection to demonic influences. The demonic makes its appearance in the novel on the first night after the inscription is made on Balak’s back. Balak then has the following nightmare:

Meah Shearim rose and stoned him with its shadows, until he was all covered by shadows, and from the shadows leaped the skeleton of a wolf, who then turned himself into a jackal and a fox and a kind of dog unlike any dog in this world. The dog’s hairs stood on end, even those hairs that were stippled by the painter with two words that mustn’t be mentioned. The skeleton’s bones began rattling and saying, Don’t be scared, for we are your father and you are our son. (OY, 292)

The terrifying apparitions of wild canines that trigger a primordial fear in Balak recur in a later dream in which a jackal appears with a head erect like an ostrich and “spectacles of flesh cover his eyes from below halfway up, and the spectacles gleam like a peacock’s tail.” There is also a fox whose eyes are “big and bulging, and they look purple and black . . . And the mouths of the animals, oh, their mouths, herald evil” (OY, 614). In both dreams the appearance of wild canines is associated with deep-seated predatory urges, urges that dogs have suppressed as they became domesticated animals. In

the dream, it is Balak's doggish nature that compels him to warn the neighborhood of the beasts approaching to devour the turkeys strutting on the street. But then Balak discovers that his throat is parched and he cannot bark, thus failing to fulfill his role as a dog. The parched throat serves as an indication of rabies, marking Balak's estrangement from the position that he occupies in the human world. Insofar as the inhuman is designated, following Kafka's investigating dog, as a "stepping outside of what is human, a stepping into an uncanny realm that is turned toward the human,"<sup>12</sup> the onset of rabies in Balak marks the other possibility, that the expulsion from a state of humanity can lead to the domain of pure, savage bestiality. In this sense, the skeletal wolf's words "don't be scared, for we are your father and you are our son" should be taken as an invitation to unearth the primordial predatory urges that lie dormant within the dog.

Balak thus pursues his investigations not only to discover the truth of the signs inscribed on his back, but also as an attempt to avoid regression into a state of pure bestiality. Wandering among the different national and ethnic groups in Jerusalem, he eventually comes to adopt a materialist outlook on life:

The earth is the same everywhere, said Balak, and there is no distinction between the people of this place and the people of that place. And if there is a difference, it is an external difference, for the end of every creation is flesh and bone, that is sustenance, whether they say a blessing over slaughter like the Jews, and say Who hath sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us to slaughter, or say a blessing like the Karaites, who say, Who allowed us to slaughter, or say a blessing like the Ishmaelites, who bless in the name of the merciful and compassionate Allah, or they slit the neck like all other nations, they all intend the same thing, sustenance. (OY, 499)

According to Balak's newly espoused materialism, cultural diversity among human beings appears merely as an accidental or arbitrary feature through which basic biological needs are satisfied in sublimated form. From this perspective, humans appear to be no different from dogs, except that they devised elaborate rituals by which they believe themselves to be superior to animals. Thus, Balak's materialism leads him to reject the anthropocentric notion of man's superiority over creation, and he eventually imagines an entire cosmogony tailor-made for dogs. In this alternative creation story, in

the beginning there was a camel that ate many fields of prickly pears and died. All the animals gathered and fed on the contents of his belly and on his flesh. Thus, both the camel and the animals that fed on it thoughtlessly conformed to the essential purpose of their existence, sustenance. But the dog and the vulture nobly stood out among these animals, and guarded the camel's skin from the mice that came to nibble on it. From that skin the sky was formed. The flapping of the vulture's wings created the wind, and the pounding of the dog's tail created the surface of the earth, with valleys, mountains, and rifts. The dog shouted from the earth and the vulture shrieked in the air, frightening the sky and causing it to weep. From the sky's tears the land was filled with water, but the animals soon drank it all, and the world was on the brink of destruction. The dog then went to the vulture and convinced him to let him ride on his back up to the sky. The dog bit the firmament and it began weeping, releasing rain upon the land.

The role of the dog as earth's savior in this myth of creation is intimately linked to the occurrences depicted in the novel. To begin with, the drought that came upon the world in its state of creation is related to the prolonged and terrible drought that plagues Jerusalem in the last section of the novel. Balak invokes the myth of the Great Dog when he is overcome by thirst: "Balak stuck out his dry tongue and shouted *hav*, bring [*hav*] us a downpour, bring [*hav*] us a drop of water, I am going mad from thirst. He bared his teeth and looked at the firmament. Presumably he recalled the deed of his forefather, the Great Dog who, during a drought, poked a hole in the firmament and brought down rain" (OY, 616; translation modified). Here, the mythical story of the Great Dog has come to replace the traditional Jewish-anthropocentric association between the blowing of the Shofar and the outpouring of rain. In ascribing redemptive power to the bite of the dog, Balak's animal religion has estranged him from the human world. Ultimately, his failure to overcome the gap between letter and meaning compels him to renounce human agency altogether and ascribe absolute autonomy to dogs, even under the most blatant subjection to human mastery: "And thus he stood and questioned, Where do the sticks get their power to hit if not from the dog who attracts the stick to him. The proof of this is that, as long as the stick doesn't see the dog it doesn't hit him. And not only the stick, but also human feet, as long as they don't see the face of a dog they pass by or creep by" (OY, 623). Unlike Kafka's investigating dog, who

assumed an ontological superiority of dogs in a “wide, empty world” devoid of human beings, Balak asserts the primacy of dogs in a world inhabited and governed by humans. His claim for canine superiority does not stem from ignorance and repression but from deliberate refusal.

Balak’s extreme assertion of canine ontological superiority is counterposed not only to human dominion over creation, but also to the demonic bestiality of the wolf and the jackal, which does away with meaning altogether. Paradoxically, then, the bite with which Balak infects Isaac with rabies is not an expression of brute animality but of the dog’s ultimate claim to truth:

Said Balak . . . I’ll bite him and the truth will leak out of his body.  
And Balak already saw the truth leaking from the blood of the  
painter like the bountiful rains, as when the Great Dog bit the fir-  
mament. (OY, 628)

Here, once again, the redemptive power of the bite finds its archetypal evocation in the Great Dog, not in order to quench a literal thirst for water, but a figurative “thirst” for truth. In Balak’s profane religion the bite comes to assume the role of the singular, redemptive act through which the world will be brought to a state of messianic redemption, bridging the intolerable gap between figure and lived experience, between “significance” and “physical nature.”

BEFORE BALAK ARRIVES at Meah Shearim to bite Isaac Kumer and extract the truth from him, he has one more encounter with a demonic figure that will prove to be decisive in the aftermath of the bite. At the outskirts of Jerusalem, in the dead of night at an old abandoned windmill, Balak encounters Lilith, an old night owl “who knew the world and knew everything that was done in every house, under every roof” (OY, 604). Although the word “Lilith” means “owl” in Hebrew, the name also refers to a female demon in Jewish mythology. In Hasidism, Lilith came to symbolize the root of all despondency—a force dialectically opposed to joy. Indeed, the high value placed in Hasidism on joy, song, and dance is due to conquering the despair and melancholia associated with Lilith.<sup>13</sup> Lilith’s demonic provenance thus links her directly with Balak’s melancholia as well as with the other apparitions that Balak encountered, the skeletal wolf and the jackal

with the spectacles of flesh. Like them, Lilith appears at night when Balak is in a semiconscious state, and she too tries to convince him to turn his back on the human world and embrace a bestial existence.

Lilith attempts to discourage Balak from going to Meah Shearim to seek the truth of the inscription on his back by telling him a parable of the hyenas that came to Arzef the taxidermist and asked him to be stuffed because they wished to live forever. The appearance of Arzef in Lilith's tale is surprising because this character is first encountered in the novel in a wholly realistic context. He first appears when Isaac, after moving to Jerusalem from Jaffa, goes with his friends to Eyn Rogel and visits his house. Arzef is a native of Jerusalem, but he has left human society behind and "lives alone like the First Adam in the Garden of Eden, with no wife and no sons and no cares and no troubles, among all kinds of livestock and animals and birds and insects and reptiles and snakes and scorpions" (OY, 242). Like Balak, Arzef lives on the margins of the human world, inhabiting a creaturely realm, but as First Adam, the lord of all creatures. His mastery of creation is exemplified by his art, which embellishes nature and supposedly overcomes mortality, as he explains to the curious hyena who sees him stuffing a fox in Lilith's tale:

As long as your flesh exists you're considered dead, for everyone wants to eat your flesh and break your bones, and if you are saved from the foes and you die in the hands of Heaven, your end is dust and vermin and worms, which is not the case if you threw away your flesh and tossed off your bones and put straw instead of flesh and bones, for then you live forever and exist for eternity, and moreover, they put you in a museum and everyone desires and yearns to see you. (OY, 606)

The hyena, naively fascinated by Arzef's powers, is eager to get rid of his flesh and be stuffed in order to gain immortality, and Arzef readily grants him his wish. After the hyena fails to return home, his brothers go looking for him. They eventually find him in Eyn Rogel, and are struck by the gleaming glass eyes of the stuffed animal. When they ask their brother what happened to him, Arzef, who hides behind the back of the stuffed hyena, tells them with the hyena's voice that he is now immortal, and an object of envy for all, repeating the explanation that he gave to

their brother. Upon hearing this, the brothers become jealous and plead with Arzef to grant them immortality as well. Arzef agrees and grants them their request.

At the crux of this parable is the animals' profound misunderstanding of the art of taxidermy. The stuffed animal, with its embellished form and gleaming eyes, fascinates them, and Arzef cunningly presents taxidermy as a kind of redemption from natural history and from the sorrows that plague creaturely existence, but this is clearly a deception. The real ontological character of the stuffed animals is revealed earlier in the novel, when Arzef travels to Jaffa to send a pair of stuffed animals abroad and is bothered by the customs officials "who had trouble assessing how much customs duties to impose on [the stuffed animals], either the rate for live animals but they weren't alive, or the rate for inanimate objects but they did have skin and they did have bones" (OY, 458). Far from exalted immortal beings, the stuffed animals are degraded creatures, located somewhere between the animal and the inanimate object. Most important, such a demotion on the scale of creation reveals the fundamental consequence of art. Though the work of art may appear to save the creature from decay, it ultimately debases its corporeality, its very creatureliness. When art appears to overcome decay, it will do so only by rendering the object hollow and insubstantial, like Arzef's stuffed animals. The only immortality the artifact can ever attain is the false "immortality" of inanimate objects, characterized not by eternal life but by an inability to die.

Nevertheless, the authority that the work exudes by virtue of its aesthetic qualities belies its artificiality, and the fascinated spectator is drawn into the depth of the work, exemplified by the wish to "live forever and exist for eternity, and moreover, they put you in a museum and everyone desires and yearns to see you." The spectator, captivated and distracted by the false promise of art, forgets the essential deception involved in it. Such captivation is achieved because the art object essentially appears as something mysterious and opaque. Indeed, the sway of the artwork's mystery is so great that the animals renounce their own nature and willingly submit to the dominion of man. In this way man truly emerges as the lord of earthly creation: not by divine sanction, but through the deception inherent in the mastery of opaque and fascinating art.

The implications of this parable for Balak involve artifice and the artificial in their capacity as language, as written words. Like the hyenas that are fascinated by the enigmatic form of the stuffed animal, Balak is captivated by the opaqueness of the signs inscribed on his back. From the demonic perspective, the dog's desperate wish to uncover the truth of these signs is not born of his own volition, but is rather the consequence of the creaturely fascination with art and its false promise of a hidden meaning that lies behind the written sign. By going back to Meah Shearim in an attempt to decipher the hidden meaning of the signs, Balak is thus willingly (yet unwittingly) submitting to human dominion. Thus, Lilith's parable seems to imply that the signs inscribed on Balak's back are as hollow as Arzef's stuffed animals; they carry no meaning, and therefore in his investigations and in his journey to Meah Shearim, Balak merely perpetuates human dominion instead of breaking its hold. The real freedom, the parable implies, lies in obeying the call of the flesh, surrendering to predatory impulses, or as Lilith puts it: "instead of flesh what will you wish and instead of skin what will you desire?" (OY, 608). Lilith's solution to the dog's hopeless search for meaning is to revert to a primordial state of animality.

As he faces the prospect that the signs on his back may be no more than empty signifiers that do not lead to a hidden truth, Balak experiences an extreme bout of melancholy:

Balak folded his paws and shut his eyes and lay and thought of the same thing all the scholars of all generations are toiling to discover, What are we and what is our life, and are all the sufferings and pains and insults and grief that come to us worthwhile for the sake of a little bit of ephemeral pleasure. Especially me, since I don't have even a bit of pleasure, but I do have many pains, and on top of every pain comes an even harder pain. Black bile overcame him and he wanted to die. (OY, 608)

Overcome by melancholy, Balak senses the intrinsic connection between his condition and demonic influence, speculating that the "black bile that clasped him like scabies and bubbled up all over his body came from them, from the demons in the windmill" (OY, 609). His aggravated state of melancholia is born of the real fear of "leaving the world and not



grasping the truth” (OY, 626). Indeed, after Balak bites Isaac, this fear becomes a reality:

After he dug himself a hole in the flesh of the painter and dripped the truth from it, the truth should have filled all his being, but in the end there is no truth and no nothing. And he is still as at the beginning, as if he hadn't done a thing. (OY, 630–31)

Balak's madness, culminating in the bite, is the endpoint of his desperate attempts to breach the veil of obscurity and attain truth and meaning. Once he realizes that truth is denied him, that he will die “like a dog,” Balak reverts to the state of savage bestiality exemplified by the jackal and the wolf. This is the final outcome of Balak's melancholia and his despair, not only with the meaning of the signs on his back, but with meaning as such. Instead, he opts for the substantiality of flesh—human flesh—as a substitute for the meaning from which he is excluded. Balak's newly acquired taste for flesh is an inversion of the eagerness, which the hyenas demonstrated in Lilith's parable, to reject flesh and submit to artifice.

Despite its obscure allegorical format, Lilith's parable offers some penetrating insights into the relationship between art and creaturely life. Specifically, it addresses the attraction that the artificial holds for the creature as well as its detrimental effect on it. Art is fascinating not only because it is beautiful, but also because it offers redemption from the futility of natural-historical progression. The age-old creaturely complaint of the futile suffering of earthly life is answered by art's promise to “live forever and exist for eternity.” But the redemption that art offers is illusory, and those who submit to art's authority and mystery are degraded in the process. The stuffed hyenas and Balak in his relentless investigations are victims of the misappropriation of art, that is, of the naïve attempt to possess and embody the meaning encapsulated in the artificial.

In *Only Yesterday*, animals are not the only victims of art's misappropriation. Isaac, too, is led astray by the Zionist idea of a sweeping transformation in Jewish mentality that will take place after settlement in the Land of Israel. The move to the new homeland was to redeem the Jew of his inherent doggishness and fashion a new man who would have natural and creative bonds with his community, his sexuality, and the land. Before

embarking on his journey to Palestine, Isaac fantasized about such a sweeping transformation into manhood that would compensate for his personal shortcomings. We are told, for example, that “never in his life had Isaac paid any heed to girls. If his passion struck him, his heart carried him to the fields and vineyards of the Land of Israel” (OY, 24). In Isaac’s imagination the fulfillment of masculinity is tied to the idea of tilling the soil, and Zionist ideology provided him with a compensation in which the attainment of manhood was deferred until his arrival to the Land of Israel. Isaac’s story, however, proves to be the reversal of the common Zionist narrative. As long as he lived in the Diaspora he belonged in a community and adhered to a coherent worldview. Upon making the *Aliya*, Isaac’s naïve dreams of tilling the soil, belonging in a community of pioneers, and becoming a man are shattered in the face of the harsh realities of pre-mandatory Palestine. As Michal Arbell writes, “since [Isaac] lost his place among the pioneers who till the soil, he cannot claim either Jaffa or Jerusalem as his own. The failure of the attempt to become an organic part of the pioneer society leaves him without affiliation, without a clear national-ideological identity, and without such a framework of affiliation Isaac probably cannot define himself in a stable and satisfactory manner as an individual.”<sup>14</sup>

This failure to integrate socially and become a tiller of the soil is complemented by Isaac’s inability to consummate a relationship with Sonya. Like Balak when he was cast out of Meah Shearim, Isaac is left with no affiliations, and his utter failure to realize his dreams leaves him in an undisclosedness of meaning. Helplessly confronted with an unattainable ideal of masculinity, Isaac experiences, through his commitment to Zionism, the gap between figure and lived experience. It is therefore no surprise that toward the end of the novel Isaac appears as a melancholic street dog, at least in the metaphorical sense. After Balak bites him, Isaac completes his transformation into a dog in the literal sense as well. The rabies that he contracts from Balak signifies an animalization that is nothing but the culmination of melancholia.<sup>15</sup> The disease removes Isaac, like Fayesh before him, from the world of human concerns and thrusts him deep into an allegorical modality in which he is rendered a “receptacle of the forgotten.” In his rabid state Isaac is subjected to demonic influences, and he begins to experience the artifacts of the human world as enigmatic hieroglyphs. In one dream, for example, Isaac sees Arzef reading *The Fables of Foxes*, “and the book was strange for

it wasn't made of letters but of voices" (OY, 631). Isaac tries to decipher the voices and sees that his own hand "strolls over to the book and writes hav hav" (OY, 632; translation modified), but Isaac's hand that wrote was completely detached from Isaac who observed the hand writing. In this dream the meaningful human word degenerates into a meaningless animal sound, depicting the loss of legibility associated with the infrahuman. Nevertheless, the written bark is not entirely devoid of meaning; as a form of an "asignifying intensive utilization of language," it exemplifies the extreme stage of Isaac's self-alienation. In his fascination with artifice, Isaac has become estranged from his self, a creaturely self that articulates an urgent, deep-seated need for a disclosure of meaning.

Ultimately, Isaac's failure to achieve human fulfillment is not presented in the novel as an inherent flaw in Zionism itself but as the result of its misappropriation. For Isaac naively believed the promises of poets, such as Bialik in "In the City of Killings," that Zionism could offer redemption from a flawed diasporic mentality. He failed to realize that adherence to the ideals of Zionism does not liberate the individual, but rather imposes upon him a set of harsh physical and material demands. Like Balak and his myth of the Great Dog, Isaac uses Zionism to construct a personal myth, a myth that helps him avoid rather than confront the demands of modern masculinity. Isaac's colleagues, such as Menachem and the pragmatic Rabinovitch, might have been initially drawn to Zionism for the same reasons, but they eventually learn to perceive these ideals as artificial, and in a long and arduous process of adaptation were able to secure a place for themselves in Palestine. Isaac, on the other hand, is unable to adapt to life in his new homeland because he cannot overcome the gap between the ideal and the real, between "significance" and "physical nature." After failing to achieve the ideal image of masculinity propagated by Zionism, he could do nothing but sink into depression. Isaac, the melancholic man, is thus not the antithesis of the Zionist pioneer (that would be the diasporic Jew) but is rather the symbol of his failure.

It was precisely this melancholic legacy that had to be resisted and suppressed in order for Zionism to fulfill its goals in the Land of Israel during the first decades of the twentieth century. By closely depicting the various factors that led to Isaac's downfall, the novel charts the internal challenges that Zionism faced in order to establish its project of individual

and collective emancipation. Isaac, who failed to become pragmatic, had to die a doggish death, a death that is neither murder nor suicide but *shechita*. Like the pogrom victims in Bialik's "In the City of Killings," there is a correspondence between Isaac's death and natural occurrences. On the day that Isaac is buried we are told that the sky became cloudy and rain began to fall. This was the first rain after the long drought that plagued Jerusalem. The rain lasted for a week, and when it stopped "the earth was smiling with its plants and its flowers. And from one end of the Land to the other came shepherds and their flocks, and from the soaked earth rose the voice of the sheep, and they were answered by the birds of the skies. And a great rejoicing was in the world. Such rejoicing had never been seen" (OY, 641). The final pastoral scene in the wake of Isaac's death is not simply a natural occurrence, but a natural-historical one. It serves to symbolically obliterate the memory of Isaac's life and the circumstances of his death in order to commemorate "the elite of our salvation in Kinneret and Merhavia, in Eyn Ganim and in Um Juni, which is now Degania, you went out to your work in the fields and the gardens, the work our comrade Isaac wasn't blessed with" (OY, 642). Isaac's death is consigned to oblivion because the account of his life and death epitomize and expose some of the inherent flaws and weaknesses of Zionism in the early days of the second *Aliya*. From the retrospective viewpoint in which *Only Yesterday* was written in 1945, Zionism had already established itself as a successful settlement project in Palestine, and the failures and meaningless deaths of its early adherents could now be safely unearthed and contemplated.

AGNON'S SOMBER ACCOUNT of the Zionist pioneering act as a suppression of creaturely melancholia marks a shift from the fervently idealistic tone that informed Zionist literature from Bialik to Greenberg. More importantly, however, it foreshadows the terms in which the dichotomy between history and nature will be staged in Jewish literature after the Holocaust. In this context, Anat Pick has argued that the Holocaust enters Jewish literature as a "cosmic upheaval" in which the "challenge of the *Muselmann* is not confined to the 'zone of the human,' but projected unto creation as a whole."<sup>16</sup> Or to put it in other words, the Holocaust lays bare the capacity for bodily vulnerability shared by both humans and animals. As we have seen, the theme of creaturely vulnerability appeared in Jewish literature long before

the Holocaust in Abramovitsh's writings. However, in *Only Yesterday*, this theme was taken up and given a unique allegorical expression in Lilith's parable of the stuffed hyenas, epitomizing the bodily degradation to which animals were subjected as a result of human art.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Agnon remained true to the spirit of Kafka's work in which creaturely vulnerability was always framed within a spatialized allegorical modality. After the Holocaust, creaturely vulnerability would be displaced from the realm of allegory into a markedly historical referent, as in Isaac Bashevis Singer's famous line from "The Letter Writer": "in relation to [nonhuman animals], all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka."<sup>18</sup>

This paradoxical displacement of the allegorical into the realm of the historical marks the reduction of the infrahuman in post-Holocaust literature and critical thought to a mere openness to nonhuman lifeforms. By contrast, my analysis has shown that the figures of animals that populate the writings of such authors as Abramovitsh, Bialik, and Kafka emblemize a fundamental gap between figural expression and lived experience. As Benjamin wrote in his Kafka essay, "[animals] are not the goal, to be sure, but one cannot do without them."<sup>19</sup> Pick's reductive reading of the infrahuman as attentiveness to the suffering of animals, even though it is not entirely misguided, nevertheless distorts the crucial allegorical modality upon which the depiction of animals in Jewish literature is predicated. As we have seen, in allegory the temporality associated with the gap between "significance" and "physical nature" is experienced as a natural-historical progression: the bracketed time of the pogrom, of Isrolik's hallucinations, of Josef K.'s execution, and of Balak's encounter with Lilith. Everything that transpires within this bracketed zone remains outside the purview of history and memory and is pervaded by oblivion and forgetfulness. In turn, the forgotten, in its claim on the life of the individual, exerts the binding force of a law in a state of exception, maintaining its validity despite its absence. These three interrelated aspects of the infrahuman—natural history, forgetfulness, and the law in its kenomatic state of exception—have already been fully articulated in the pre-war writings of Kafka and Benjamin, and they subsequently reappear after the war in the work of another German-Jewish writer, Paul Celan. Celan's poetry bears a close affinity with Kafka and Benjamin—and for that matter, with Agnon as well—in its blatant refusal to reduce the allegorical to the purview of

the historical. Here, one could think of no better example than his early poem “Todesfuge” (“Death Fugue,” 1948):

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening  
 we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night  
 we drink and we drink

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends  
 wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts  
 wir trinken und trinken<sup>20</sup>

This poem, which addresses the formative experience of the concentration camp, invokes a distinctive allegorical modality that accounts for its so-called “surrealist” atmosphere. To begin with, the dimension of natural-historical progression is brought to the fore in the very first lines of the poem, which present, as John Felstiner intuited, a distorted account of the first days of creation.<sup>21</sup> Yet if these lines refer to the sequence of creation, it is creation without grace in which time progresses through repetition and not by means of development. The days are thus punctuated by acts of drinking that mark the passage of time—morning, midday, and night—but this is the empty time of natural history. In the concentration camp, historical time has come to a standstill, or rather, it has “merged into the setting.”<sup>22</sup> This empty time is nevertheless not devoid of certain forms of activity, for example, shoveling and the playing of music. The German “whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the ground / he commands us play up for the dance.”<sup>23</sup> These and other senseless acts testify above all to the absence of a law or a governing principle in which such forms of behavior would find their ultimate justification. As in Kafka’s world, in the concentration camp of Celan’s “Todesfuge” the organization of life and work is based on the constitutive absence of the law.<sup>24</sup> Yet this absence nevertheless produces a binding effect, as everyone in the camp seems to know their place: the German “whistles his hounds to stay close / he whistles his Jews into rows.”<sup>25</sup> In the reality of the camp, the forgotten makes itself manifest in this distorted and groundless order to which one is compelled to obey. Thus the poem bears witness to the unraveling of the human in the exposure to the law in a state of exception, and what emerges in its place is the creature, bare life.

In these terms, the literary representation of the Holocaust in Celan can be seen as an extension of the poetic modalities and philosophical notions found in the work of Benjamin and Kafka. Celan, in a way, inhabits their world and extends it further, poetically, into the concentration camp. Notably, Celan explicitly invokes the legacy of Benjamin and Kafka in a sustained reflection on the relationship between figure and lived experience, the artificial and the creaturely, in his “Meridian” speech. The speech was given on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960, and is widely considered today to be one of the most significant statements on poetry after the Holocaust. Celan frames his speech by addressing what he calls “the problem of art”:

Art, ladies and gentlemen, with everything that belongs to it and will yet belong to it, is also a problem, and as you can see, a mutable, tough and long-lived, I want to say, an eternal problem. (M, 2)

For Celan, the term “art” (Kunst) refers to the realm of the artificial, to the “puppet-like, iambically five-footed,” to an association with automata, the mechanical, and the ability to “string word upon word” (M, 2; PCTM, 2). But Celan is not interested in the sphere of meaning opened up by means of art. For him, the crucial dimension in which art is experienced is undisclosedness of meaning:

But whenever there is talk about art, there is also always someone present who . . . doesn’t really listen.

More exactly: someone who hears and listens and looks . . . and then doesn’t know what the talk was all about. But who hears the speaker, “sees him speak,” who perceives language and shape, and also—who could doubt this here, in writing of this order?— breath, that is, direction and destiny. (M, 3)

Celan draws the decisive portrayal of art from the realm of the infra-human, that is, from the gap between “significance” and “physical nature.” Although the individual who experiences art in this way remains excluded from art’s meaning, he can nevertheless perceive “breath” (Atem), as well as “direction” (Richtung) and “destiny” (Schicksal). These terms mark a concern with the nonverbal elements in language: with the intervals between words and timbre of speech (“breath”); with the inevitability of

death (“direction”); and, finally, with the specific route that physical life must take in order to satisfy art’s prescriptions (“destiny”). Celan identifies such a peculiar perspective on art—which recalls Balak’s preoccupation with the unintelligible signs on his back—with the figure of Lucile from Büchner’s play *Danton’s Death*. When Danton and the other leaders of the French Revolution mount the scaffold toward the end of the play, Lucile, the wife of Camille Desmoulins, goes mad and cries “Long live the King!” thereby guaranteeing her own death sentence. Celan emphasizes that Lucile’s utterance stands in sharp contrast to the words spoken by the condemned group of revolutionaries on the scaffold, which are characterized by their excessive artificiality and theatrical quality:

The passengers are there, all of them, Danton, Camille, the others. Here too they all have words, many artful words, and they make them stick, there is much talk—and here Büchner only needs to quote—talk of going-together-into-death, Fabre even maintains that he can die “doubly,” they are all at their best—only a few voices, “a few”—nameless—“voices” find that “all of this is old hat and boring.”

. . . when all around Camille pathos and sententiousness confirm the triumph of “puppet” and “string,” then Lucile, one who is blind to art, the same Lucile for whom language is something person-like and tangible, is there, once again, with her sudden “Long live the king!” (M, 3)

Celan refers here to a preeminently historical situation. The condemned men—who could well be seen as the literary antithesis to the figure of Josef K.—recognize the historical “significance” of their execution, and they do not lack words and memorable declarations to fit the occasion. Caught up in the matrix of figural meaning, they seem to be oblivious to their own vulnerability or creatureliness. It is Lucile, who in her madness has been deprived of the capacity to appreciate the artificial, that perceives the fundamental futility of the situation. Lucile’s “Long live the king!” is not a declaration of loyalty to the ancien régime any more than it is a statement meant to produce a dramatic effect. Rather, her utterance infuses human speech with the “breath” that emanates from the creaturely realm. That is to say, Lucile has appropriated human language, reproducing an utterance in



order to shape a “direction” and a “destiny” for herself. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe observed, “by shouting ‘Long live the King!’ Lucile simply kills herself. Here, the word is suicidal . . . As pure provocation, it signifies (the decision to die), but in a mode other than signification. It signifies without signifying: it is an act, an event.”<sup>26</sup> My one reservation regarding Lacoue-Labarthe’s formulation is that it is somewhat misleading to designate Lucile’s utterance as an “event,” since the artificial solidity of the historical event is precisely what this utterance seeks to unravel. Like Shylock’s “I am not well,” Lucile’s “Long live the king!” bears witness to the unbridgeable gap between lived experience and figural expression. Celan calls it a “counterword” (Gegenwort), a “step,” and “an act of freedom” (M, 3; PCTM, 3).

In what exactly does this “act of freedom” consist? To be sure, the emphasis is not placed on the decision to die per se, but rather on the manner in which one is to die. The crucial point is that like Josef K. or Isaac Kumer, Lucile dies like a dog, in obliviousness to historical “significance.” Her utterance is an act of resistance to the sublation of life to a totalizing figural scheme. In turn, it also exposes the death of the condemned men as subject not to historical necessity, but to the futility of natural-historical progression. The historical “injustice” of the Revolution is thus revealed, through Lucile’s counterword, as a traumatic exposure to a law in a state of exception. In this sense, Celan mentions that Lucile’s utterance pays homage “to the majesty of the absurd as witness for the presence of the human” (M, 3). And significantly, Celan proceeds to call this form of utterance “poetry” (Dichtung) (M, 4; PCTM, 4).

In this short exposition on Büchner’s *Danton’s Death*, Celan demonstrates “the problem of art” to which he alluded at the beginning of his speech. To put it simply, the problem of art—an eternal problem—is poetry. Poetry becomes a problem for art, that is, for the attempt to claim historical significance for human life and death, because poetry exposes the artificiality of the attempt to merge figure and creature, “significance” and “physical nature.” In this respect, the distinction between “art” and “poetry” in Celan’s “Meridian” speech corresponds to the distinction between symbol and allegory in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* essay.

Nevertheless, poetry, as Celan envisions it, is not entirely bereft of any relation to history. Poetry is nothing but the articulation of the creaturely as it is implicated in a constitutive historical experience. As an example, Celan

cites the opening line of Büchner's *Lenz*—"On the 20th of January Lenz walked through the mountains," marking his way into madness and death. And Celan proceeds to frame the encounter between poetry and history as a question: "perhaps one can say that each poem has its own '20th of January' inscribed in it?" (M, 8). Celan alludes here, among other things, to the date of the infamous Wannsee Conference during which the "Final Solution" of the Jewish question was resolved, thus locating the poem on a fracture between figural representation and lived experience. In his speech notes he writes:

These dates and moments, they cannot be read off the calendars and clocks, the "old war-horses and bystanders of history" miss them; only the victims of what appears from the perspective of that "bystander" as history, know something about it. (M, 58)

The poem, as a writing that emanates from the bracketed time of the catastrophe, must therefore proceed from a congenital condition of undisclosedness of meaning. The opacity and hermeticism of the poem affirm not the absolute autonomy of art (as in the poetry of Mallarmé), but the "angle of inclination of [the poet's] creatureliness" ["dem Neigungswinkel seiner Kreatürlichkeit"] (M, 9; PCTM, 9). The poem aims at establishing a set of correlations between the historical date, in its multivalency, and a creaturely "angle of inclination." Thus, the poem becomes emblematic of the experience of the victims of history, exemplifying—as Ulrich Baer put it—"the near impossibility of witnessing a historical trauma through which language seems to have lost the capacity for genuine address."<sup>27</sup> In its obscurity, the poem gives voice to a traumatic experience that

can neither be considered subjective or empirically verifiable . . . nor dismissed as mystical or transcendental because it does not leave the realm of the material. Its historical dimension derives partly from the blurring or the "wounding" of the distinction between an inside and an outside . . . through which a traumatic memory controls a subject's life like an external stimulus, as if from the outside, although in reality it is lodged inside the subject.<sup>28</sup>

The poem that speaks the opaque language of trauma blurs the distinction between inside and outside, subject and object, and thus signals

the resurgence of the allegorical modality in the realm of history. The poem aims to liberate the trauma from the purview of forgetfulness, from the demands of subjectivity as well as from the regimes of representation that govern historical existence. Simply put, poetry does not release the subject from its trauma, but the trauma from its subject. The poem approaches this goal not by excavating an original trauma that lies behind language and subjectivity, but by working on artificiality itself, by estranging what is in itself already estranged and artificial.

Celan illustrates this approach by introducing Büchner's notion of "medusoid" art. He emphasizes that Büchner's Lenz "has only disparaging words for 'Idealism' and its 'wooden puppets'" (M, 4). Lenz counters these constructions of the figural by paying attention to the "natural and the creaturely" [Natürliche und Kreatürliche] (M, 4; PCTM, 4). But for Büchner the depiction of the creaturely, of "physical nature," does not take place by means of mimetic art. Instead, when he sees two peasant girls sitting on a rock, he wishes that "one . . . were a Medusa's head in order to turn a group like this into stone, and call everybody over to have a look" (M, 5). Here, the attention to the "natural and the creaturely" is paradoxically achieved by means of an art that renders itself uncanny, that is, by an art that deliberately presents itself as artificial. By announcing its own artificiality, "medusoid" art exposes the deception involved in the attempt to merge figure and experience, as exemplified in Arzef's fascinating art of taxidermy that involved the debasement of the creaturely through the embellishment of form and figure. By contrast, "medusoid" art does not seek to overcome or transcend the creaturely, but to simply detach it from its dependence on the figural.

The poem, as language emanating from the creaturely or experiential dimension of human life, must therefore employ the artificial in its very artificiality in order to authentically address the creaturely. This is what Celan means when he mentions that "poetry has to tread the route of art" ["Dichtung, die doch den Weg der Kunst zu gehen hat"] (M, 6; PCTM, 6). Here, the poem is charged with extracting the profound expressions of the creaturely from the uncanniest manifestations of the artificial. And Celan provides another example from Büchner's *Lenz*: ". . . except sometimes it annoyed him that he could not walk on his head" (M, 7). Seemingly an early statement of autonomous art that impresses the reader with its cryptic obscurity, as a poetic expression it exemplifies the encounter of the creature

with itself as a being possessing insufficient ground, because “he who walks on his head, has the sky beneath him as an abyss” (M, 7). Lenz’s experience of his own fundamental otherness is thus rendered equivalent to Lucile’s “Long live the king,” marking the unravelling of subjectivity under conditions of insanity, silence, and death. Here, the creaturely emerges out of the strange, or more precisely, out of a constitutive allegorical modality.

The strangeness of “medusoid” art calls into question the modernist tradition that emphasized the role of poetry in expanding the domain of autonomous art. In response to the demand to “enlarge art,” Celan proposes instead to “go with art into your innermost narrows. And set yourself free” [“geh mit der Kunst in deine allereigenste Enge. Und setze dich frei”] (M, 11; PCTM, 11). The freedom that Celan conceives of here is the freedom from totalizing figural schemes in which subjectivity is consolidated and the creaturely is suppressed. In its medusa-likeness, the poem unravels subjectivity by paying attention to the creaturely aspects of everything it addresses without disclosing the meaning of the whole. Attention to creaturely otherness therefore emerges as the most decisive aspect of poetic language, illuminating its innate darkness and obscurity. And in a famous passage, Celan identifies such a form of attention in the work of Benjamin and Kafka:

The attention the poem tries to pay to everything it encounters, its sharper sense of detail, outline, structure, color, but also of the “tremors” and “hints,” all this is not, I believe, the achievement of an eye competing with ever more precise instruments, but it is rather a concentration that remains mindful of all our dates.

“Attention”—permit me to quote here a phrase by Malebranche, via Walter Benjamin’s essay on Kafka—“Attention is the natural prayer of the soul.” (M, 9)

In locating his own work within a literary trajectory that stretches from Büchner to Kafka and Benjamin, Celan affirms the decisive role of the attentiveness to the creaturely as a longstanding literary preoccupation. Yet Celan has gone further than his predecessors in articulating the poetic and ethical stakes of such attentiveness, and even more importantly, in explicitly identifying the *infrahuman* in its relation to a formative historical experience: the trauma of the victims. In this respect Celan’s poetry is diametrically opposed to Zionist literature in which attentiveness serves to

ultimately consign the creature to oblivion. Even in Agnon's novel, which presents a relatively sober account of the early failures of Zionism, the gratuitous obliteration of Isaac's death by means of natural occurrences implies a principle of natural-historical selection in which the weak are weeded out from the strong in the course of the adaptation to life in the Land of Israel. Those who fall away from the historical process return to nature without leaving a trace. In the poetry of Celan, by contrast, nature itself is exposed in its artificiality in order to allow the trauma to resurface from oblivion, and thereby effect a "breathturn" [Atemwende] in which authentic being is manifested. But this authentic mode of being, which is identical with the creature, owes nothing to a native land and lies "outside all enrootedness and all dwelling."<sup>29</sup> Under such conditions of statelessness a new poetry, which has outlived the human, must begin to establish itself.

41. Kafka, "Investigations," 125–56; "Forschungen," 431–32.
42. Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial; The Letters to Felice*, trans. Christopher Middleton (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 88.
43. See chapter 4, note 9, above.
44. "ein Hinaustreten aus dem Menschlichen, ein Sichhinausgeben in einen dem Menschlichen zugewandten und unheimlichen Bereich"—see Paul Celan, "Der Meridian," ed. Bernhard Boschenstein and Heino Schull, in collaboration with Michael Schwarzkopf and Christiane Wittkop, in *Werke*, Tübingen edition (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 5. The English translation is taken from Paul Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials*, trans. Pierre Joris (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 5; translation modified.
45. Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog," 130–31; Kafka, "Forschungen eines Hundes," 441–42.
46. Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 224.
47. *Ibid.*; translation modified.
48. Franz Kafka, "In Unserer Synagoge," in *Kritische Ausgabe, Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, 405. Translation is mine.
49. Franz Kafka, "The Animal in the Synagogue," in *Parables and Paradoxes in German and English*, trans. Nahum Glatzer (New York, Schocken, 1961), 51; translation modified.
50. *Ibid.*, 55.
51. *Ibid.*, 57.
52. *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 5

1. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," 255.
2. Paul Celan, "Der Meridian," ed. Bernhard Boschenstein and Heino Schull, in collaboration with Michael Schwarzkopf and Christiane Wittkop, in *Werke*, Tübingen edition (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 8. The "Meridian" speech will be cited in the text in this edition as "PCTM," followed by the page number. The English translation of Celan's "Meridian" speech is taken from Paul Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials*, trans.

Pierre Joris (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010). This edition will be parenthetically quoted as “M,” followed by page number.

3. Boaz Arpaly, *Rav-roman: hamisha ma’amarim al Temol Shilshom le-S. Y. Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998).

4. S. Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 286. Subsequent references to the novel will be abbreviated as “OY.”

5. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*, 22. In contrast to Greenberg, who refers to barking as a gesture marking the expressive limits of human despair, Agnon appropriates the bark literally as a sound that blends seamlessly with human language. See chapter 3 note 23, above.

6. The stone has recurred as an emblem of melancholia in modern Hebrew literature in the poems of David Fogel. For an analysis of melancholia in Fogel’s poetry, see my article, “The Love of a Dog: Melancholia in David Vogel’s *Before the Dark Gate*,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 23 (2016), no. 2, 168–90.

7. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 155.

8. *Ibid.*, 152.

9. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 5.

10. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 146.

11. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 322–33.

12. See chapter 4, note 44, above.

13. Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Messianism*, trans. Batya Stein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 139.

14. Michal Arbell, *Katuv al oro shel ha-kelev: al tfisat ha-yetsira etzel S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 2006), 216.

15. In the *Trauerspiel* essay, Benjamin explicitly links melancholia and rabies: “If the spleen, an organ believed to be particularly delicate, should deteriorate, then the dog is said to lose its vitality and become rabid. In this respect it symbolizes the darker aspect of the melancholy complexion.” *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 152.

16. Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, 50.

17. Here it is also important to recall Agnon’s vegetarianism as another element comprising the ethical foundation that Pick has termed “creaturely fellowship.” See *Creaturely Poetics*, 50.

18. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Letter Writer," in *The Séance and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1974), 234.
19. See chapter 4, note 9, above.
20. Paul Celan, "Deathfuge," in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2001), 30–31.
21. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 34–35.
22. See chapter 2, note 21, above.
23. Celan, "Todesfuge," 31.
24. See chapter 4, note 8, above.
25. Celan, "Todesfuge," 31.
26. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Catastrophe," in Aris Fioretos (ed.), *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan*, trans. Andrea Tarnowski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 137.
27. Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 198. Baer's description of trauma is clearly informed by Dori Laub's account of testimony and trauma in Holocaust survivors as an "event without a witness": "The historical reality of the Holocaust became . . . a reality which extinguished philosophically the very possibility of address, the possibility of appealing, or of turning to, another. But when one cannot turn to a 'you' one cannot say 'thou' even to oneself. The Holocaust created in this a world in which one *could not bear witness to oneself*." Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival" in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 82.
28. Baer, *Remnants of Song*, 278.
29. Emmanuel Levinas, "Paul Celan: From Being to the Other," in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 44.

#### POSTSCRIPT

1. Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," 138–39.
2. *Ibid.*, 136.
3. *Ibid.*, 137–38.
4. *Ibid.*, 138.