

THE MATCHLESS MASTER OF MODERN HEBREW LITERATURE

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2018/12/the-matchless-master-of-modern-hebrew-literature/>

In his fiction, and especially in the novel *Only Yesterday*, S.Y. Agnon casts an ironic, unfooled eye on the inner lives of his fellow Jews and their lopsided bargains with modernity.

December 3, 2018 | Hillel Halkin

This is the tenth and final essay in a series by Hillel Halkin on seminal Hebrew writers of the 19th and early-20th centuries. The preceding nine essays have dealt with the novelists [Joseph Perl](#), [Avraham Mapu](#), [Peretz Smolenskin](#), and [Yosef Hayyim Brenner](#), the poets [Yehudah Leib Gordon](#), [Hayyim Nahman Bialik](#), and [Rahél Bluvshstayn](#), the essayists and Zionist thinkers [Ahad Ha'am](#) and [A.D. Gordon](#), and the writer, journalist, and intellectual [Micha Yosef Berdichevsky](#).



Shmuel Yosef Agnon circa 1966, when he won the 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature. Pictorial Parade/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

I. A Taste of Agnon

Yakov Malkov was a Ḥabad Ḥasid and a bit of a writer. A day on which an article of his appeared in the newspaper *Ḥavatsalet* was a red-letter day for him, since having readers made him feel he was doing some good in the world. Because he had a sensitive throat, he had chosen to live in Jaffa rather than in Hebron or Jerusalem, the sea being a physic for throat conditions—and because a man must provide for his family, and Jaffa was not one of the Land of Israel's holy cities whose faithful received charity from abroad, he had opened a boarding house. In it were three rooms: a dining room, a sleeping room, and a room for his family. In summertime, when vacationers came from Jerusalem to bathe in the sea, he spread a mat in the backyard, moved his family to it, and rented out the third room, too.

At sundown, the boarders returned from their work covered with dust, sand, and plaster and put away their tools. One went to wash his hands and face; a second to wet his throat with a glass of soda; a third to see if there was mail for him on the window sill; a fourth to glance at the day's *Havatselet*. One noticed that the author Yosef Hayyim Brenner was there and hurried to greet him. Brenner shook his hand warmly like a man who would like to give a friend a gift and has only his own warmth to give.

"You should get yourself a glass of tea," he said.

"I will, I will," said Brenner's greeter excitedly, as if made suddenly aware of what he had been missing all along. "I'll go get some tea right away."

But he didn't. Having run into Brenner, it was hard to part with him.

Malkov donned his long, heavy gabardine that came to his feet and put on the special hat that he wore to synagogue and other such occasions. "If you people were in the habit of praying," he said, "we could have a minyan here. Since we're not that fortunate, you'll excuse me for being off to evening prayers."

Glad for the chance to be with Brenner, we told him, "Pray for us, too, Reb Yakov."

Malkov turned to look at us. "You can pray for yourselves," he said.

Malkov strode in briskly and called cheerfully, "Good evening, lads! A good evening to you all!" He took off his gabardine, hung it on a peg, doffed his hat, and gave it a loving pat. Seeing his wife standing and talking in the dining room, he scolded, "A person might think you were a rabbi giving a sermon. Back to the kitchen, woman, and tend to your affairs! Yosef Hayyim, you'll have a bite to eat with us."

"I'm afraid not," Brenner said.

"Don't tell me that woman has scared you into thinking there's nothing to eat here," said Malkov. "All the fancy dishes she ate at her parents' made her think no other fare is fit for a Jew. Sit down, brother, have a seat and dig in. Hemdat, here's a piece of fish for you. At the feasts in the World to Come, you'll long for the tail end of its tail. Mapku, you're a regular here: go ask Azulai for a few dozen eggs." (Mapku was Gurishkin, called that by Malkov because he wrote fiction like Avraham Mapu.)

"Sit down, brother, have a seat and dig in. Here's a piece of fish for you. At the feasts in the World to Come, you'll long for the tail end of its tail."

"I'll go, Reb Yakov," said little Yankele.

“You stay here,” Malkov said. “You’re a *kohen* and I don’t send priests on errands, especially if they can’t even say kaddish for their own father. Don’t you think he’s worth at least one kaddish? You’ll come to synagogue with me tomorrow and say it. I knew this fellow’s father, may he rest in peace,” he said to Brenner. “He served God and country. He farmed land in Hadera and caught yellow fever, but he wouldn’t leave it even when he was sick. He said, ‘It’s leaving the Land of Israel that kills a man, not yellow fever.’ When he was dying he pointed to outside the window and said, ‘Great is our shame, for we have forsaken the land.’ Polishkin, put down that *Havatselet!* If you’re looking for something to laugh at, try one of Eliezer Ben-Yehudah’s rags. Or are you afraid that heathen’s clowning will rub off on you? Yosef H̄ayyim, you’re new in this country. You don’t know how wise its wise men are. Listen to a penny’s worth of their wisdom.”

Brenner didn’t like to hear talk of Ben-Yehudah, neither for nor against. Out of respect for his host, though, he shut his eyes and listened.

“The year Professor Boris Schatz opened his Bezalel school of arts in Jerusalem,” Malkov said, “he decided to throw a Hanukkah party. They made a statue of Matityahu the high priest brandishing the sword with which he stabbed the Greek who sacrificed a pig on the altar, and they ate, drank, and had a bash. The next day Ben-Yehudah published a favorable editorial. His only problem was the statue. Matityahu, he said, was a religious fanatic, not a Jewish nationalist. So long as the Greeks merely overran our country, plundering and killing and laying everything waste, he and his sons in Modi’in didn’t lift a finger to stop them. Not until our religion was attacked did they rise up valiantly et cetera et cetera, in honor of which et cetera et cetera we commemorate them for eight days. What do you think would have happened, Ben-Yehudah asked, if that statue had come to life last night? It would have run every last party-goer through with its sword, that’s what. The sacrifice on the altar would have been us.”

All this while Brenner never opened his eyes, as if better to see what Malkov was describing. When Malkov was done, he opened them and rocked with laughter.

“That’s a damned lie, Malkov!” Gurishkin shouted. “A damned lie!”

“That’s enough out of you, Mapku,” said Malkov, stroking his beard. “You’re so used to being an unbeliever that you don’t even believe Ben-Yehudah.”

Brenner laughed so hard that he had to grip the table to keep from falling to the floor. He stopped to catch his breath, burst out laughing again, and said, “You’ll have to forgive me, my friends, for carrying on like this. It’s just my vulgarity.”

It was a lovely night, as most nights are in Jaffa when a hot, dry wind isn’t blowing from the desert. The same sea that keeps the desert’s parching heat away gave off a sultry redolence in which the flat sand shone. The sand didn’t bother the strollers. It was pleasing, as sand is in the dark. And as it was pleasant to walk on, so we were pleased with ourselves. Every one of us knew where his next meal was coming from. Gone were the hard times in which we never went out at night

because we were weary or hungry, too poor to afford a crust of bread because all the jobs went to Arabs. Now, the Jewish politicians of Jaffa had been forced to give us the contract for the new school they were building, and even those who claimed we couldn't compete with Arab labor had to admit we knew how to work. . . . Soon the first houses north of Jaffa would be going up and Jewish workers would be the ones to build them. . . . For the time being, only 60 of them were planned. But although 60 houses weren't 60 cities, we who had no grand aspirations thought them grand enough.

Brenner was not among the celebrants. What was there to celebrate? Did building 60 houses mean you had caught the messiah's donkey by its tail? Jews built houses. A single money lender in Lodz owned more of them than all the homes due to rise north of Jaffa. Did that make him the Jews' savior? You might say, of course, that building a house in Palestine wasn't like building a house in Poland. But houses were going up in Jerusalem, too, whole neighborhoods of them, and what good did they do apart from adding to the sum total of loafing, good-for-nothing, fawning, quarrelsome hypocrites who lived off the dole sent them by their benefactors in the diaspora, those philanthropists of God's chosen who lived off the fleshpots of Europe and threw their brethren in the Holy Land a bone for their rotting teeth to gnaw on, in payment for which they and their *gesheftn* were prayed for at the Wailing Wall? One thing alone was worth doing: farming the land and living from its bounty. But a plow made no commotion, which was why so few cared to walk behind one. We were simply building a new exile, the exile of Palestine, while thinking we were the deputized redeemers of the Jewish people—a people that had no use for us and didn't know the first thing about us. Only a handful of dimwitted idlers were hypnotized by Zionism's dreams of a glorious past and a future in which everything would be done for them by Arabs so that they could sit at home drinking tea. "Except for the farmers of Rehovot, my friends, except for the farmers, it's all humbug, humbug, humbug! Yankele, what was it your father said as he lay dying? 'Great is our shame, for we have forsaken our land.' Forsaking the land is the greatest shame of all. Jeremiah knew that. Tell us about your father, Yankele."

Yankele blushed and said nothing. Brenner put a hand on his shoulder and looked at him fondly. Yankele took heart and said, "I never knew my father, because when people began dying of yellow fever in Hadera, the children were sent to Zichron Ya'akov. I'll tell you something I heard about him, though. Once he was asked, 'Well, Reb Yisra'el, are you happy here in the Land of Israel?' My father answered, 'I would be if not for one thing. When I walked the streets of my town in Russia with its Jew-hating scoundrels and constables, they spat at my beard and gave me dirty looks and I knew I was in exile. When I prayed, I prayed with a broken heart. Here, we're in our own country. There's no Russian constabulary and no exile. I'm a man without worries, and I'm ashamed to stand before my Maker an unworried man."

Brenner gave Yankele a big hug and began to sing to a tune of Malkov's, "Come, ye children, hearken unto me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord."

The night was a fine one with a fine sea, and Brenner's words were fine words. Once, when we had no work and nothing to eat or do, most of us thought as he did. Now that there were plenty of jobs and you could make a good living, we were like Yankele's father who missed his broken heart. Each of us thought of his own affairs: one of the new clothes he was going to buy, a second of paying for his girlfriend's passage to Palestine, a third of saving up enough to study at a university abroad. Our friend Yitzhak was thinking of Shifrah.

Midnight came and went. A cool breeze began to blow. The sea changed its tune and foamed with waves that made pockets of water in the sand. Brenner gazed at it as if struggling to grasp its grandeur. He flexed a hand and took Hemdat's as though reaching for a pen while trying to phrase an insufficiently clear thought. "It's time for sleep," he said.

"Yo," said Podolsky. "*M'darfgeyn aheym.*"

Podolsky stressed *aheym* and laughed, because none of us had a home to call his own.

"*Kinderlakh,*" Brenner repeated in a singsong, "*m'darfgeyn aheym.*"

Once Brenner departed, and a while later Hemdat, all felt how tired they were. Each said goodnight and went his own way, one to his room and another to his bed in a corner of a cheap hotel in Nevey Shalom.

II. Welcome to the Yishuv

The preceding excerpts come from a passage in Shmuel Yosef Agnon's long novel *T'mol Shilshom*, published in English as *Only Yesterday*. Set in 1908-1910 in Jaffa and Jerusalem, and appearing in Hebrew in 1945, the novel tells the story of Yitzhak Kummer, a young Second Aliyah (1904-1914) immigrant to Palestine from Austrian Galicia, as was Agnon himself in those years. Unlike the Zionist ideal of the *haluts*, Yitzhak is not a tiller of the soil. Although it was his ambition to be one upon arriving in Palestine several years prior to the scene in Yakov Malkov's boarding house, things turned out differently. Ending up in Jaffa rather than in a pioneer commune like Degania or Kinneret, Yitzhak has become a housepainter, a profession he earns well from, especially now that an increase in Jewish immigration at the end of the first decade of the century has led to a construction boom. One of its signs is a plan to build, on the sands north of Jaffa's Jewish neighborhood of Nevey Shalom, the first houses of what will soon be known as Tel Aviv.

Yitzhak does not live in a cheap hotel like Malkov's. He can afford a rented room of his own, as most of his Second Aliyah friends cannot. Nearly all of them are, like him, relatively new arrivals in Palestine from Eastern Europe; most have grown up in religious homes and have put religious observance behind them; most are single and have little prospect of marriage. Few could support a family even if they found a partner, which is difficult because there are more men than women among them. To this, Yitzhak is an exception. While shy with women, he has had a romantic relationship with a fellow immigrant his age named Sonya Tsvaying, and he is, at the time of the evening at Malkov's, in love with Shifrah, the only child of Reb Feysh, a religious zealot in the ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood of Meah She'arim.

Most of the new arrivals to Palestine grew up in religious homes and put religious observance behind them; most are single and have little prospect of marriage.

Although Yitzhak dreams of marrying Shifrah, a match between him and a daughter of the Old Yishuv, as the anti-Zionist, ultra-Orthodox community of Palestine is called, is hardly imaginable. Only unlikely circumstances could have led to their even meeting. Knocking on a door one day to ask for a glass of water after he has moved from Jaffa to Jerusalem, Yitzhak finds it opened by an elderly couple he recognizes from the ship that brought him to Palestine. These are Shifrah's grandparents, who are staying with their daughter Rivkah, Reb Feysh's wife. Invited in by them, Yitzhak chats and returns a second time, when he is served refreshment by their granddaughter. At once he is as smitten by her as "Adam was when God set Eve before him."

None of this would have happened had Reb Feysh been at home, since while he might have tolerated Yitzhak's presence there once, he surely would not have welcomed him a second time. Soon afterward, however, Feysh is felled by a sudden stroke that leaves him speechless and semi-comatose, thus enabling Yitzhak to keep visiting by offering his assistance to the now providerless women. The neighbors gossip. Rivkah, though grateful to Yitzhak for his help and less extreme in her views than her husband, is uncomfortable with the situation. So is Shifrah. Still in her teens, she cannot conceive, even while feeling an attraction to Yitzhak, of anything developing between them. When once they meet by chance out-of-doors and Yitzhak, seeing they are alone, seeks to hold her hand as no young man from Meah She'arim would dare do, she runs away in a fright. Yet not only is he determined to marry her, he decides to pave the way for it by returning to Jaffa and asking Sonya to release him from whatever obligations he might have incurred to her. Amused that he should think he has any (their brief romance has meant less to her than to him), she assures him that he is free—and it is at this point that we encounter him at Malkov's.

In all this there is an irony that no one is aware of, namely, that Yitzhak himself has been the cause of Reb Feysh's condition. This is because, approached by a stray dog while standing in the street at the end of a day's work, he playfully painted the Hebrew words *kelev m'shuga*, "Mad Dog," on the animal's side. Spreading through the city, news of a rabid dog on the loose creates panic. It is talked about everywhere; the newspapers are full of it; new sightings keep being reported. One is by the headmaster of a French-speaking school, who, ignorantly reading the Hebrew consonants of *kelev* from left to right instead of the other way, takes the dog's name to be Balak. This is the name of the Moabite king who in the biblical book of

Numbers hires the sorcerer Balaam to put a curse on Israel, and it is Balak, as henceforth the dog is known, suddenly appearing in front of Reb Feysh in Meah She'arim, who gives him such a fright that he ruptures a blood vessel in his brain.

III. Love and Other Immigrant Sorrows

Yitzhak is nineteen or twenty when, his family's oldest child, he leaves their Galician shtetl for Palestine, about which he is as naïve as he is idealistic. Since childhood he has avidly read Hebrew and Zionist literature and accounts of First Aliyah farming colonies, which have imbued him with a romantic view of the Land of Israel. *Only Yesterday's* opening paragraph is a medley of the clichés they have cluttered his mind with:

Like our other comrades of the Second Aliyah, Yitzhak Kummer left his native town and country for the liberation of his people, setting out for the Land of Israel to rebuild it from its ruins and be rebuilt by it. As far back as he could remember, there wasn't a day he hadn't thought of it. He had pictured it as a blissful place whose inhabitants were graced by God. Its villages nestled amid vineyards and olive groves; its fields were laden with grain; its fruit-festooned valleys teemed with flowers and were ringed by forests that rose to a cloudless blue sky; joy reigned in every home. By day, all plowed and sowed and planted and reaped, harvesting their grapes and olives, threshing their wheat, and treading out their wine in their presses; when evening came, they sat beneath their vines and fig trees, each man surrounded by his wife, sons, and daughters. Gladdened by their labors and grateful to be where they were, they thought of their days outside the Land as one thinks of sorrowful times in happy ones and felt doubly blessed. Yitzhak was an imaginative type and his imagination was guided by his heart.

Although Yitzhak is disabused of his illusions only gradually, the process begins, as it did for Oved Etsot, the protagonist-narrator of [Y.H.Brenner's](#) novel *From Here and There*, immediately with his arrival in Palestine. Rowed ashore from his ship in Jaffa port by bawling Arab longshoremen who overcharge him, he next has his luggage snatched up by a Jew who commands him to follow.

The man led him through marketplaces, side streets, alleyways, and back yards. . . . The sun blazed down from above and the sand steamed up from below. Yitzhak's skin was on fire; his every fiber was aflame. Although a barrel of sweat, his lips were dry, his throat was parched, and his tongue felt like toast. . . . His escort brought him to a yard and a dark house crammed with gunnysacks, baskets, boxes, crates, bundles, and ropes and said, "I'll have a table set and call you when your meal is ready." Yitzhak reached into his jacket pocket for the letters of recommendation he had brought to let his host know he was a worthy guest.

It is a comic moment. Inappropriately dressed in a jacket and tie and stunned by the savage Middle East heat that no one has warned him about, Yitzhak, who has traveled with letters of recommendation from Zionist politicians in Galicia in the belief that they will make an

impression in Palestine, thinks he is being invited to a fellow Jew's home in a brotherly gesture of welcome. In fact,

while his host had not misjudged Yitzhak's worth, Yitzhak had misjudged his host. The man was an innkeeper and cared only for exacting what he could for food and lodging. . . . Yitzhak bore it cheerfully. "Tomorrow," he thought, "I'll have a job working in the fields and won't need any of my money." What difference did it make how much he was made to pay now?

This, too, is an illusion that quickly bursts. The next day Yitzhak sets out for nearby Petah-Tikvah, the country's largest Jewish farming colony, and goes from door to door looking for work. None is to be had. The farmers hire mostly Arabs, and if there are jobs for Jews, they have been taken long ago. Yet now, too, he puts the best possible face on things. Told by a farmer's wife to try the next-door neighbor and discovering that the latter's house has been abandoned, he fails to see that he has been cynically treated. Rather, he wonders, "How strange: a house whose neighbors don't even know no one lives in it!"

No jobs are to be had. The farmers hire mostly Arabs, and if there are jobs for Jews, they have been taken long ago.

His trusting nature, however, also works to his benefit. He is drowsing on a park bench one day in the German Templar neighborhood of Sarona, his money all but gone, when a Templar, mistaking him for a worker who has fallen asleep while taking a break, hands him a paint can and a brush and orders him to get to work on a nearby fence. Instead of replying "Go paint it yourself," Yitzhak obeys without questions, is paid for his labors at the day's end, and is told to return the next day. It is the start of a profession that gives him security and status in a world of semi- or unemployed young immigrants. Although at first a mere "smearer," as he is called by a fellow painter, he eventually masters his new trade and becomes skilled at it.

It is the combination of innocence and a steady job that piques Sonya's interest in him. Sexually experienced, as he is not, she finds him a challenge—a virginal young man who must be made a conquest by creative means but who is also well-mannered and well-dressed, can afford to take her out for coffee or ice cream, and can be counted on not to disappear on the next ship to leave Jaffa, as her previous boyfriend Yedidiah Rabinovitz has just done. Yitzhak is Rabinovitz's friend, too, and it is in Jaffa's port, to which the two have come to see him off, that he and Sonya have their first conversation. The description of their meeting is a fine example of what the Israeli critic Nitza Ben-Dov has called Agnon's "art of indirection," his masterly ability to convey subtleties of character and situation in passing and without comment, leaving the reader to notice them or not. Yitzhak and Sonya have just returned to shore after parting from Rabinovitz aboard ship.

A chill cloaked the autumnal silence of a diminished world. The smell of the sea mingled with the smell of rotting oranges. Yitzhak and Sonya walked wordlessly until they left the sandy shore for a city street. Sonya plucked a sprig of jasmine from a bush and sniffed its flowers, tossing some over her shoulder. "I think I'll have my shoes shined," she said. Hiking up her dress, she placed her foot on the box of an Arab shoeshine boy. He straightened her leg, buffed her shoe, spat on his

brush, dipped it in polish, and set to work until the shoe gleamed like a mirror. Yitzhak thought of how she had stood on the tips of Rabinovitz's shoes to kiss him on the forehead. He rubbed his forehead and stared at his hand. Placing her other foot on the box, Sonya told the Arab to make sure to do a good job as if valuing the second shoe more than the first. And then what had happened? Yitzhak tried to remember. Then Rabinovitz had dusted his shoes with a silk handkerchief. "Finis," Sonya said. She paid the Arab and turned to go. Yitzhak walked beside her, sometimes closer and sometimes further away.

In silence, they reached the boulevard. It was lined by consulates, offices, and shops, in one of which Rabinovitz had worked. Since it was closed for the Sabbath, it didn't know yet that he had left it to go abroad. Above it was a balcony over which hung the white, blue-lettered sign of the municipal information and employment bureau. Yitzhak had been there many times with friends as down-and-out as himself. A melancholy muteness brushed his lips.

Sonya glanced at the shut store's sign and said, "Rabinovitz won't be back anytime soon. He's like Yarkoni. They come like a house on fire and leave like thieves in the night. Now Gurishkin will think he's the center of the world. Do you know Ya'el H̄ayyut? Gurishkin is running after her friend P'ninah. You don't? That's no great loss. Have you seen Gurishkin's mustache lately? It droops over his mouth like two bananas." She brought the jasmine to her nose and sniffed it.

Yitzhak walked unobtrusively by her side. He couldn't think of a single clever thing to say. All he could answer to her questions was "Yes" or "No." Not that he cared about her. Or if he cared, it was only because she was his friend's girlfriend. Being unused to female company, he stepped as carefully as if she were a countess or a duchess. This amused her more than it annoyed her. Or perhaps it annoyed her more than it amused her. She glanced at him and asked, "Is this how you behave with a woman in Galicia?"

Yitzhak blushed and looked down at the ground. "The only women I've ever talked with," he said, "are my mother and my sisters."

Sonya had encountered Yitzhak before and wondered what Rabinovitz saw in such a provincial. She threw him another look and shut her eyes. Then she straightened the tips of her collar and laid a hand on her heart. When they reached Nevey Shalom, she pointed to a side street with the sprig of jasmine and said, "That's where I live." For a moment, she seemed about to say more. She thought better of it, shook Yitzhak's hand, and turned into the street. Yitzhak headed home.

In an incisive study of *Only Yesterday*, Amos Oz points to some of the seemingly minor details in this passage that reveal more than they may appear to at first glance. The dust Rabinovitz wipes from his shoes, for instance, tells us all we need to know about the shallowness of his feelings for Sonya. What man who genuinely cares for a woman would rush to wipe away, even from his feet, her last traces? And is not Sonya herself, in deciding on a whim to polish her own shoes, making a parallel statement? (Perhaps, having noticed what Rabinovitz has done, she is even paying him back tit for tat. Her needless bossiness toward the shoeshine boy shows her need to be in command.) And while she may or may not be fully conscious of the

symbolism of her act, she is surely aware of the opportunity it gives her to show off her legs to Yitzhak. Her disdainful conviction, expressed as though to a confidant, that Rabinovitz will not return, and her disparagement of Gurishkin, are signals, too, that she is already available for a new partner and considers Yitzhak an eligible candidate.

Does Yitzhak understand her signals? If he does, it is only subliminally. His hand travels to his forehead to ascertain what a woman's kiss there might feel like and is then stared at as if the kiss might have rubbed off on it; yet in first denying to himself that he is drawn to Sonya and then admitting that he is but only because of their shared friendship with Rabinovitz, he is struggling to suppress the sexual feelings she arouses. She, for her part, scarcely able to believe his *naïveté*, is uncertain how to proceed. Should she reassure him that she is a proper young lady who needn't be feared? She primly straightens the tips of her collar. Should she let him know she is an emotional being who will respond to any overtures on his part? She lays a hand on her heart. And what can it be that she refrains from saying at the last moment? Is it "Drop by some time" and does she change her mind because she realizes this might scare him off?

Like Rabinovitz, Sonya's friends, some of whom we have met at Yakov Malkov's, are Yitzhak's as well. Although most come from Russia and think of Galicia as a backwater, their stories are similar to his. They, too, came to Palestine dreaming of being pioneers, of "plowing and planting and sowing and reaping," and they, too, whether because the opportunity has not presented itself, or because they lacked the courage to face the hardship that seizing it would have entailed, have failed to live up to their dream. Construction work in Jaffa, though it, too, is physical labor, leaves them feeling that they have not given themselves fully to the land as they have been told they must do by idolized figures like Brenner and the Zionist thinker [A.D. Gordon](#) (who also makes a cameo appearance in the novel). And Yitzhak, if anything, feels this even more keenly, since as a housepainter, it seems to him that he is simply coloring what others have made.

Yet life in Jewish Jaffa, when there is work, is not unpleasant. There is the sea. There are miles of empty beach. There is a small-town atmosphere in which everyone knows everyone, an informal, easy-going code of manners, and the carefree camaraderie of young people unburdened by adult responsibilities. Yitzhak and Sonya's friends rarely talk seriously; they prefer to banter and joke, for though having taken their place in Zionism's vanguard by coming to Palestine, they are uneasy with the role, as if its weight were too much for them. Many have left for greener pastures, like Rabinovitz who plans to make money abroad, and many who have remained have doubts whether they should have. They belong to a small minority of Jews in an Arab country and Zionism's progress is too slow for them to have confidence in its success or to derive from it the sense of purpose that might replace the religious faith they have lost.

In respect of religion, Yitzhak is no different:

He behaved like the rest of us. He didn't go to synagogue or put on *t'filin* or observe the Sabbath or the holidays. At first he tried making a distinction between not doing what he should have done, such as praying regularly, and doing what he shouldn't have done, such as eating non-kosher food, but he didn't persist in this. In the end, he did what was forbidden without qualms.

None of this involved thinking very hard about such things. It was a matter of being surrounded by people who had come to believe that religion was of no importance, and that having no need for it, they had none for its commandments. On the contrary: because they sought to live honestly, it would have been hypocritical to perform rituals they were far removed from. If Yitzhak thought about it at all, he was vaguely guided by the notion that the Jews of Palestine were divided into an Old Yishuv and a New Yishuv, each with its customs. Since he belonged to the new one, why keep those of the old one? Even when he changed his opinion of other things, he didn't change it of this.

And yet if his opinions didn't change, he still missed the home, the Sabbaths, and the holidays that he no longer had. Although he never entered a synagogue at such times, he often sat silently communing or humming a ḥasidic tune until he forgot his workaday woes. He was not the only one. Jaffa was full of ex-yeshiva students. Sometimes, when getting together, they waxed nostalgic over ḥasidic tales and melodies or imitations of rabbinic sermons. The generation before theirs had sung songs of Zion. Their generation had had enough of these. When their souls overflowed with longing, they looked for what was lost where they had lost it.

If Yitzhak, a descendant of the renowned pietist Yudel Ḥasid, the fictional protagonist of Agnon's novel *The Bridal Canopy* who settles in the Land of Israel in old age, is unlike his friends in such matters, it is because he occasionally muses about returning to Jewish practice. Even when toying with this idea, however, "he threw himself the sop of doing only what demanded the least effort, such as saying his bedtime prayers—and then, too, he said them less as a matter of duty than as a nostrum to help him fall asleep."

There is an emptiness in the lives of the young Second Aliyah immigrants in Jaffa that they try to ignore.

There is an emptiness in the lives of the young Second Aliyah immigrants in Jaffa that they try to ignore. So long as Yitzhak is involved with Sonya, he, too, is hardly aware of it. Having never had such a relationship before, he has no way of knowing that the excitement he mistakes for love is simple sexual pride and a newfound sense of manliness. Fooled into thinking that Sonya is in love, too, he contemplates marriage, only to be rudely awakened when, her conquest of him accomplished, she loses interest in him and lets him know that their affair is over. Once again he is painfully slow to read her behavior, taking as long to understand her wanting to be done with him as he did her wanting to take up with him. This only forces her to be more cruel:

Once he ran into Sonya and insisted on accompanying her on her way. The talk came around to Jerusalem.

"I've never been there," Yitzhak said.

"Anyone with blood instead of paint in his veins," Sonya said, "goes to see it."

She added:

“I’ve seen everything in Jerusalem there is to see. What didn’t I see there! I saw Bezalel and Professor Schatz, and Ben-Yehudah’s workroom, and the desk he wrote his big dictionary on. . . . All that time, I never slept a wink. Every day I went to see the ancient sights and every night I walked the Old City’s walls with the art students and danced with them in the moonlight.”

A pale flush spread over her face as on the night she gave Yitzhak his first kiss. His heart trembled like the golden gossamers playing over her lips and he reached out to stroke her hair. She turned her head away and said, “Let’s go.” When they reached her street, she shook his hand and said goodbye. Before he could say it too, she was gone.

Dancing in the moonlight, Sonya makes clear to Yitzhak, is not for dullards like him. In the end, half comprehending that he is no longer wanted and half still hoping to please her, he takes her advice and leaves Jaffa for Jerusalem.

IV. A Tale of Two Cities

Jaffa and Jerusalem, pre-World War I Palestine’s two major cities, are opposite poles between which *Only Yesterday* moves back and forth. Apart from a brief account of Yitzhak’s travels to Palestine with which the novel begins, its four parts are divided equally between them, with Parts I and III (in which the scene in Malkov’s boarding house takes place) set in Jaffa and Parts II and IV in Jerusalem. Jaffa is coastal, flat, sandy, and humid; Jerusalem, land-bound, mountainous, rocky, and dry. Jerusalem is central to Jewish history and sacred in Jewish tradition; Jaffa, never a hub of Jewish life, is marginal to both. In the one city live Jews, some with roots in it going back generations, who are predominantly religious, anti-Zionist, and Yiddish-speaking; in the other, secular Zionist newcomers who do their best to speak Hebrew.

There were exceptions, of course. There were Jews in Jaffa like the religious Zionist Yakov Malkov—and actual historical figures like Brenner and Gordon—and militant secularists in Jerusalem such as the students and teachers (one of them Iran Jan, the friend of the poet [Hayyim Nahman Bialik](#)) at the Bezalel School of Arts, or the circle around Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, the creator of modern Hebrew who edited the daily *Ha-Tsvi* and the weekly *Hashkafah*, both rivals of the pro-Orthodox *Havatsselet*. But though geographically the two cities were only several hours apart by train, the journey between them was one between two worlds.

Though geographically Jerusalem and Jaffa were only several hours apart by train, the journey between them was one between two worlds.

Only Yesterday’s description of Yitzhak’s arrival in Jerusalem has a lyricism, not often found in Agnon’s prose, that makes it very different from that of his arrival in Jaffa. At the train station he finds a wagoner to take him to a hotel.

A breeze stirred, brushing the rocks and sifting the dusty earth. The air had changed. Its brittle silence could have been the quiet weeping of the mountains. Yitzhak was overcome by a hushed sadness, as if tidings were on the way that might be either good or bad. Good being the stronger force, he hoped for it while faint-heartedly fearing the worst. The old wagoner steered his horses at an easy pace while humming the melody of a prayer under his breath.

Yitzhak peered ahead. His heart began to pound like a man's nearing a long-awaited destination. Soothed by the strains of the wagoner's prayer, he felt his fears melt away. Before him, laced with gold and veined with red fire, were the walls of Jerusalem, washed by a drift of gray and blue cloud that etched in them tones of fine silver, of burnished bronze, of lustrous pewter, of rare electrum. Yitzhak leaned forward, wanting to say something. His tongue mutely sang a soundless song. He sat back again, dancing in his seat.

Yitzhak feels he has come home as he never did in Jaffa. He quickly finds living quarters and a job, and since most of his neighbors and fellow workers are observant Jews, he gradually reverts to the Orthodoxy that he has merely fantasized returning to until now. Now, too, his religious behavior is more a matter of social conformism than of considered conviction, but the way of life it conforms to is that of the shtetl he grew up in. Often, he goes to the Western Wall on Friday nights to participate in Sabbath eve prayers, which he once knew by heart and has partially forgotten.

Yitzhak would stand praying, in part from memory and in part from his prayer book. Sometimes he felt more drawn to the simple, heartfelt chanting of the Misnagdim and sometimes to the tuneful crooning of the Ḥasidim; sometimes to melodies ecstatic with the awe of God and sometimes to ones that caught fire from their own rapture. And amid them all, his heart sang its own song, his native town singing in it. Transported, he felt purged of all guilt, once again a blameless child, as unstained by sin as he had been, a boy among boys, in those faraway days.

The guilt he feels purged of is multiple. It is for having abandoned his family in Galicia; for having failed to live like a *halutz* in the Land of Israel; for having betrayed his friend Rabinovitz with Sonya and compromised, so he thinks, her good name; for having forsaken religion. His Zionism is no longer what it was. One day as he is at work with two other painters who know nothing about his past, he starts to sing.

Yitzhak's companions turned to look at him wonderingly. They had never heard anyone sing while at work.

"Are you a cantor's assistant?" one asked.

"No," Yitzhak said. "Why?"

"On account of your singing."

"I just like to sing," Yitzhak said.

"Are you a Zionist?"

"What makes you ask?"

“I’ve heard the Zionists sing a song called Hatikvah.”

“What else have you heard about them, my friend?”

“I’ve heard that they want to hasten the Redemption by committing all kinds of sins.”

“Why would they want to sin?”

“Because it’s written that the messiah will come in a generation that’s all righteous or all sinful. Since it’s easier to be sinful, that’s what they’ve chosen to be.”

Yitzhak did not respond. Gone were the days in which he had sought to make converts to Zionism. Nowadays, he was happy if no one sought to make an anti-Zionist of him. Yet whether for good or for bad—who was to say?—such things had their effect. If outwardly he was beginning to resemble a Jerusalemite, he was becoming more like one inwardly, too. When his fellow workers took a break for the afternoon prayer, he prayed with them; when they shared their meager lunch, he joined them in the grace after meals. If not for Bloykop the artist, his Jerusalemization would have been complete.

Bloykop is one of two people Yitzhak gets to know in Jerusalem who fit no conventional mold. A former Bezalel student and fellow Galician, he is, though not an observant Jew, an artist with a Jewish sensibility. “There’s not a moment in Jerusalem,” he tells Yitzhak,

that isn’t eternal. Not everyone can see that, though. Jerusalem only reveals herself to her lovers. We should hug ourselves, Yitzhak, for having the good fortune to live here. At first, when I kept comparing Jerusalem to other cities, I saw all its faults. In the end, my eyes were opened and I saw *it*. I saw it, brother, I saw it! What can I tell you, my friend? Words can’t describe a fraction of a fraction of it. Pray for me, brother, that God give me a long enough life to show you with my brush all that I see and feel. I don’t know if I believe in God, but I know that He believes enough in me to let me glimpse what most people never do. If I’m given the time, I’ll paint it.

Bloykop, who is dying of tuberculosis, is not given the time, and his death, which leaves behind a grieving wife, is a blow to Yitzhak. Although painting houses and painting pictures may have little in common, Yitzhak has not previously thought of paint as a medium for anything but covering things. That it can serve to uncover them is a revelation. Dimly, he conceives of himself and Bloykop as standing on the same ladder, he on the lowest rung and Bloykop on one of the highest. While he is only to rise one rung more, which happens when Bloykop teaches him to be an expert sign painter, thereby increasing his earning power and professional standing, his being taken into Bloykop’s confidence and shown his art gives him, too, a glimpse of what “most people never see.”

The second such person is Arzef—a taxidermist and an even more eccentric figure than Bloykop. Born into Jerusalem’s Old Yishuv, he left the yeshiva studies he excelled in to go his own way.

What had made him choose the odd profession of stuffing the skins of walking, flying, and crawling creatures? No one knew. Like Adam in the Garden of Eden, he lived by himself without a wife, children, worries, or complications, surrounded by mammals, birds, reptiles, spiders, and scorpions with whom he got along in perfect harmony. None had the slightest cause for complaint, not even when he took its life, since this only led to its acquisition by one of the great museums of Europe. Professors and scientists beat a path to his door with offers of money and honors. Arzef was no more impressed by the honors than he gave a fig for the money. . . . It was enough for him to regard his handiwork and know that no animal in the world was the worse off for it. On the contrary: more than one Palestinian bird considered extinct had been rescued by him for posterity. All he cared about was the fauna of the Land of Israel mentioned in the Bible and in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. He hunted it, discarded its flesh, and stuffed it to give it lasting existence. This was on the first six days of God's week. On the seventh he rested like everyone, rolling out a mat beside his front door and reading a book on it.

As opposed to the visionary Bloykop, Arzef does not seek to see through or past the surface of things. He is fascinated by the surface itself, and his only desire is to capture Nature, quite literally, as no artist or sculptor can do, and make it live forever. He kills to immortalize, and the immortality granted by him evokes the Garden of Eden before Death entered the world. He is a restorer working in God's atelier, and like God he labors six days a week and takes the Sabbath off.

There are other possibilities of personal and Jewish fulfillment in Palestine than those offered by the New and Old Yishuv, as two characters remind us.

Each in his own way, Bloykop and Arzef are religious personalities with a firm compass in life that is not oriented either to Jewish observance or to pioneering Zionism. They remind both Yitzhak and the reader that there are other possibilities of personal and Jewish fulfillment in Palestine than those offered by the New and Old Yishuv. Precisely because they are such autonomous beings, however, they are not models for imitation. Yitzhak can admire both but he cannot hope to become like either. They make him feel that for him the choice *is* between the new and the old, Jaffa and Jerusalem—and the longer he lives in Jerusalem, the farther from Jaffa he drifts even before meeting Shifrah and painting “Mad Dog” on Balak.

V. The Second Most Famous Animal in Hebrew Literature

Although Balak is only the second most famous animal in Hebrew literature, his name links him to the first. This is Balaam's donkey, which, struck by its master for balking beneath him on a narrow path, complains, “What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?” *What have I done?* is Balak's complaint, too, but, unlike the donkey, he never gets an answer.

From the moment Yitzhak plays his prank on him, Balak, until then just another stray dog living in Jerusalem's Jewish neighborhoods, undergoes a drastic change of life. He has not been averse to being painted. It is a hot day and the cool, wet stroke of Yitzhak's brush on his fur is pleasant, so much so that he begs for more and is driven away with a kick. This causes him to take off on the run and soon reach the streets of Meah She'arim, where, to his astonishment, pandemonium breaks out. Whoever sees him, flees; screaming mothers grab their children and dash home; merchants, before bolting from their stores, pelt him with their weights, scales, and measures. Being a Jewish dog, he puts a Jewish construction on things.

He knew enough to realize that a rabbinical court must have been sent to check the merchants' weights and scales. "Ahr, ahr," he barked, which meant: "Are you foolish enough to think I can swallow all your false weights and keep the court from impounding them?" And in fact, had the weights weighed what they should have, they would have killed him; it was God's mercy that they didn't. "Heavens above!" he cried. "Jews have sinned and I'm to blame?" Before he could get out the words, every last man, woman, and child had sped home and locked their doors. Meah She'arim was emptied of all but a single dog.

Being a Jewish dog, Balak puts a Jewish construction on things.

Only when such scenes recur wherever he appears does it dawn on Balak that something about him must be the cause of them. His adventures, which occupy long parts of *Only Yesterday*, tell of his increasingly frantic attempts to discover what this is. At first, he takes refuge in Jerusalem's Christian and Muslim quarters, where nobody can read the Hebrew writing on him and he lives and eats well, playing with the local dogs and nipping and being nipped by them. But

he found no solace there for his soul. The food he crunched with his jaws could not replace the ground snatched from under his paws. The whole world wasn't worth the small corner of it from which he had been exiled. By now he had lived so long among the Gentiles, swayed by their heathenish ways and filled with their heathenish swill, that his addled brain no longer knew a shofar from a church bell. Yet even now he disdained the revenge of apostasy and still woke to howl at midnight, it being written in the tractate of Brakhot that dogs howl in the night's middle watch.

Longing for Jewish cooking and company, Balak returns to Meah She'arim and is again driven from pillar to post. A glimpse of his reflection in a store window causes him to connect the marks he sees on himself with the sign painter, and his suspicion that these are related to his adversity is heightened when the French headmaster bends over him to read them. But what do they signify?

Balak wagged his tail and said to himself, "It's just as I thought. This whole kettle of fish is someone's fault. It's all because of that scoundrel of a painter who made a sign of me. Do I deserve to be hounded just because some good-for-nothing scribbled on my fur?"

It is in the nature of Truth's seekers to seek it in its entirety. Balak was no exception. Having set his heart on the truth, nothing but the whole truth would do. "Ahr, ahr," he barked, crouched at the headmaster's feet. Are you going to tell me what it says? Tell me everything!"

Just then the school janitor [whose Hebrew is better than the headmaster's] came along, saw the dog and the writing, and took to his heels. "He knows the truth! He knows the truth!" Balak thought. "Only what am I to do now that he's run off with it?"

Indeed, Balak was still far from the truth. Nevertheless, his pursuit of it helped him to live with his predicament. As the divine poet has said,

Blessed art thou, Science, which doth console
When the waves of misfortune o'er me roll.

Although Balak may not know that the author of these Hebrew lines is the 18th-century kabbalist and philosopher Moshe Hayyim Luzzato, he is something of a poet himself. One night as he is lolling peacefully while Meah She'arim is asleep and unable to harm him, letting the angry frustration that has been building up in him drain away, a poem comes to him. He is composing its final stanza,

Upon the earth
Walks no one now.
All is silent.
Bow wow wow,

when Shifrah's father Reb Feysh emerges from the darkness. What is Feysh doing out-of-doors in the dead of night? He is posting writs of excommunication on the walls of Meah She'arim that he is afraid to put up by day, lest the neighbors he is excommunicating for being less pious than himself tear them down before they can be read. Balak, who "took no interest in politics or religious disputes and didn't know the difference between one faction of Jews and another," thinks Feysh is out to enjoy the quiet night and greets him with a friendly bark. Alarmed, Feysh drops his lantern and glue pot while his posters are borne away by the wind.

Reb Feysh's soul was borne away with them. "What is it, Feysh?" soothed the mission he was on with a reassuring hug. "Never fear!" His soul cajoled into returning, he ran after the posters. They, however, reasoning quite logically, "If a mere agent of the law is trying so hard to retrieve us, surely we who are the law should be trying even harder to be retrieved," swerved in midair and flew straight at him, their anathemas flapping in his face. As white as shrouds, they were uncritically presumed by him to be the ghosts of the ancestors of the excommunicated men.

Feysh shrieked, turned, and ran the other way, chased by the posters, and tripped over the dog. It let out a yelp. Terrified, he went sprawling. No agent of the law should have to go through what he did.

Balak saw Feysh lying on the ground and was nonplussed. What was he to make of it? One minute a man was running on two feet and the next he was lying on all

fours. "I'd better smell him," Balak thought. "Either he's not really a man or else he is one and needs help." Reb Feysh came to just in time to find a dog sniffing at him and took off for dear life. Balak remained where he was, thoroughly mortified. No helping hand should have to feel what he felt.

Reb Feysh staggers away and collapses again in the street. Found by the neighbors in the morning, he is carried home and put to bed, never to rise from it again.

VI. The Genius of Agnon's Language

This is a good place to pause and consider the issue of Agnon's language. In Princeton University Press's published version of *Only Yesterday*, translated by Barbara Harshav, the passage I've translated above begins:

And Reb Fayesh's soul also flew away. That Commandment began clinging to him and said to him, What's wrong with you, don't be afraid. And it tempted him until his soul returned. He started running and gathering up the posters. Those scraps of paper made their own inference. If Reb Fayesh, an emissary of the Commandment, is running, we who are the Commandment itself should run even faster. They immediately began rolling away and striking him in the face. And every single note cackles with those words Reb Fayesh wrote on it. In his innocence, Reb Fayesh thought that the forefathers of the excommunicated rose up from their graves and came to take vengeance on him, for the notes were white as shrouds of the dead.

There are, it would seem, different ways of translating Agnon. But I quote from Harshav's *Only Yesterday* not so much to illustrate this point as to explain why Agnon's Hebrew confronts a translator with unique and in part insoluble problems.

What happens in this passage? Reb Feysh (in Harshav's translation Fayesh), shocked by the appearance of a dog he believes to be rabid, drops what he is holding and his posters blow away. As he struggles to master his fear and collect them, the wind shifts and bombards him with them, causing him to panic again and run the other way. Stumbling over Balak, he falls, passes out, regains consciousness, sees Balak smelling him, leaps to his feet, and vanishes in the darkness, leaving the dog to feel once again that it has done something wrong without knowing what.

All of this borders on slapstick, and Agnon makes the most of it by relating it from Feysh's and Balak's perspectives. Lacking all self-awareness, Feysh projects his fear, his attempt to overcome it, and his unconscious self-recrimination for excommunicating blameless Jews onto the soul that deserts him, the task he has set out to perform, and the personified posters that physically attack him after he first thinks they are trying to help. (Not that he doesn't know that posters can't reason talmudically, but in true primitive fashion, he thinks of himself as the cause of all that happens to him.) Balak's mental processes are equally crude. Since human beings, in his experience, do not lie down in streets, seeing Feysh sprawled in one makes him wonder, in a parody of syllogistic thinking, whether Feysh is truly human.

Harshav's translation is more literal than mine. Her "commandment" is closer to Agnon's *mitzvah* than is my "mission" or "law," and her "clinging to him" is closer to Agnon's *m'gafefo* than my "soothed [him] with a reassuring hug." But literalism brings one no closer to Agnon's meaning if its literary associations are ignored. Whereas in modern colloquial Hebrew the verb *l'gafef*, rendered by Harshav as "to cling to," has the sense of to paw clumsily or intrusively, in the Hebrew of the rabbis that Agnon is evoking it means to embrace lovingly. Feysh's sense of duty is, so to speak, putting a comforting arm around him, not desperately clutching at him.

The association Agnon has in mind is actually more specific. In *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, an ancient collection of midrashim related to the Song of Songs, we read:

When God declared [on Mount Sinai], "I am the Lord thy God," [Israel's] souls were immediately borne away [by fear]. Seeing that they [the Israelites] had died, the angels began to embrace and kiss them [*hithilu m'gafefin u-m'nashkin otam*] and said, "What is it? Never fear!" . . . And He [God] cajoled them [*hayah m'fateh otam*] until their souls returned.

Clearly, Agnon wrote his account with this midrash in mind. Although he could not have expected most of his readers to be familiar with it, Feysh certainly would have been.

Rabbinic language, however, pervades Agnon's prose even when his characters are not learned Jews. Take Yitzhak and Sonya's conversation about Jerusalem. The following elocutions in its opening lines are characteristic of rabbinic as opposed to modern Hebrew:

Once he ran into Sonya. "Ran into [her]" is *m'tsa'ah lah*, a talmudic idiom not used in the revived Hebrew spoken in Jaffa in the early 20th century.

The talk came around. The verb for "came around," *nitgalgel*, is in the passive *nitpa'el* construction rather than the active *hitpa'el*, another throwback to rabbinic diction.

"I've never been there," Yitzhak said. Translated literally, this reads, "Said Yitzhak, 'I've never been there.'" Whereas, in modern Hebrew as in English, identifying phrases like "he said" appear at the end or in the middle of a quotation, quotations in rabbinic literature begin with speaker identification, the verb always coming first.

"Anyone with blood instead of paint in his veins," Sonya said, "goes to see it." This sentence, too, begins with "Said Sonya," and her word for "paint" is not the modern Hebrew *tseva* but the Mishnaic *mey tsva'im*, literally, "colored water." Although one might argue that this is her way of sharpening her insult, the expression is not one she would have known or thought of inventing.

Archaisms are an integral part of Agnon's style, and an untranslatable one: English has no equivalents of rabbinic language.

There is scarcely a paragraph in Agnon's work that does not contain such archaisms. They are an integral part of his style, and an untranslatable one, since English, having never passed through a rabbinic period, has no equivalents of rabbinic language. To hope to create them by parallel archaisms like "Once he chauncéd upon Sonya," or "Quoth Yitzhak, 'I've never been

there,” would be patently absurd. Chaucer and Sir Thomas Mallory do not evoke the rabbis. Nothing in English does.

One must distinguish between the archaic element in Agnon and the same element in 19th-century Hebrew novelists like [Avraham Mapu](#), [Peretz Smolenskin](#), and [Micha Yosef Berdichevsky](#), who were struggling, each in his way, to forge a language usable for fictional purposes. Mapu, in adopting biblical diction in *The Love of Zion*, was not being deliberately anachronistic. In the absence of a spoken language to serve as an arbiter of what was contemporary and what was not, he chose a stylistic option offered by literary Hebrew, none of whose different stages of historical development had effaced any of its predecessors. He could hardly have written archaically even had he wanted to, there being practically nothing in the Hebrew of his day, from the biblical period on, too superannuated to be used. Although Hebrew underwent a steady process of modernization in the course of the 19th century, from which the spoken Hebrew of the early 20th evolved, the doors to the past remained open.

This was no longer true when Agnon started writing Hebrew fiction in Jaffa in 1908. There was now a spoken language in Palestine to whose speakers some things sounded natural and some did not, some belonged to the present and some to the past alone—and that Agnon’s Hebrew was suffused with the past was recognizable at once. It had in it more of “the dust of the study house” than of “the dirt of a homeland,” wrote Brenner, though he thought Agnon a writer of great promise. Its archaizing, which was to remain a permanent feature of Agnon’s prose, was intentional.

While Agnon made constant use of rabbinic Hebrew, he did not write in it. When Sonya says, “I’ve seen everything in Jerusalem there is to see. What didn’t I see there! I saw Bezalel and Professor Schatz, and Ben-Yehudah’s workroom, and the desk he wrote his big dictionary on,” she is speaking, though her phrasing might not have startled Rabbi Akiva, the Hebrew of her day, and it is not until the conclusion of her remarks, where the moon by whose light she danced is the Mishnaic *l’vanah* instead of the modern (and biblical) *yare’ah*, that she is given an archaism again. Her Hebrew is in a dialect all its own, and so in general is Agnon’s—an integration of 20th-century and rabbinic language, from the Mishnah’s to the ḥasidic homily’s, so seamless and modulated according to its needs that its components seem never to clash.

The Israeli intellectual historian Eli Schweid has said of this Hebrew that it stands

halfway between the revolution of modern Hebrew literature and the conservatism of the Hebrew literature that preceded it. Uniquely among modern Hebrew authors, Agnon reverted to an eclectic rabbinic style because such Hebrew, with all its limitations, facilitated a total engagement with Jewish culture throughout the ages rather than with that of his own age alone. He did not recycle it. He developed it in two directions, first by layering it with contemporary spoken Hebrew, and second, by finding an artistic way of harmonizing its aesthetic lapses and dissonances [owing to its different periods].

This is well put. Yet it misses, I think, an important point—namely, that in setting itself an alternative course from the one taken by 20th-century Hebrew, Agnon’s prose was also a protest against the latter.

In setting itself an alternative course from the one taken by 20th-century Hebrew, Agnon's prose was also a protest against the latter.

Spoken Hebrew's revival in Palestine, and its rapid ascendance to a position of dominance in everyday and cultural life there, was a remarkable and historically unprecedented success, without which Zionism could never have achieved its goal of recasting Jewish identity in a new, national mold. It was a success, however, that was adulterated from the start. The Hebrew that was revived was heavily influenced by Yiddish, the native tongue of most of its adoptive speakers. Its grammar departed in many ways from that of biblical, rabbinic, and 19th-century secular Hebrew alike. It was peppered with loan words and calque idioms—from Yiddish, from Russian, from German, from Ladino, from Arabic, from English, and from Turkish. Its vocabulary and expressive capacities, though they grew greatly in the course of the century, remained limited compared with those of European languages, in part because the establishment of spoken standards consigned to instant obsolescence whole strata of Hebrew's past that could previously have been mined by every Hebrew writer.

At the same time, therefore, that it was rapidly expanding to meet the demands of modern life, Hebrew also shrank drastically, shedding layers overnight that normal languages took centuries to outgrow. Nor could this shrinkage be compensated for by the kind of rich folk language, inherited from parents and ancestors, that is spoken by native populations everywhere. Ordinary Jews had spoken this way, too, in Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic, but the Hebrew they learned to speak in Palestine was an immigrant tongue, acquired from fellow immigrants who had had no native population to learn from. At its most impoverished, it was like a Palestinianized version of the Hebrew of [Joseph Perl's](#) Hasidim.

Palestinian Hebrew literature, of course, was not stunted in this fashion. Writers like Brenner were the products of intensive Jewish educations in Eastern Europe. The Hebrew they wrote was cultivated. They knew their sources and made use of them. But they no longer could make use of them as freely. Much of the language of these sources was now strange or comical to Hebrew readers who were also Hebrew speakers, especially if they were secular Zionists like Yitzhak Kummer's friends in Jaffa. Much was hopelessly *passé*. What had never before been archaic in Hebrew now became so.

Agnon's Hebrew attempts to answer a question: what might modern Hebrew have been like had it not so quickly ruptured with the past?

Agnon's Hebrew is a refusal to acquiesce in this. It poses and attempts to answer the question: what might modern Hebrew have been like had it not undergone so sudden and brutal a rupture with the past? How could it have kept in touch with its rabbinic heritage and exploited it better? How much of what has ostensibly been lost to it can be restored by a skillful enough author?

There can be no such refusal, however, that is not also a critique of the secular Zionism that, born to the Lady of Hebrew in the 19th century, fathered her *déclassé* offspring in the 20th. And nowhere is this critique of secular Zionism more in evidence in Agnon's work than in *Only Yesterday*.

VII. The Courtship of Shifrah

Balak does not remain in Meah She'arim for long. Impelled to keep wandering by his search for the truth no less than by the way he is treated, his fame spreads beyond Jerusalem. Scholars come from afar to investigate his case. An anthropologist publishes an article about an ancient custom among Jerusalem's Jews of casting out a dog to expiate their sins—a possible result, he speculates, of Islamic influence, dogs being regarded by Muslims as unclean. This leads to international protests by animal lovers and even to anti-Semitic broadsides against Jewish cruelty.

Throughout the second half of *Only Yesterday*, in which Balak plays a prominent role, Agnon has great fun with him. He has him break into the rhymed prose of Hebrew and Arabic medieval narrative. (“The dog set out with a strut in its gait, preening itself as though of high estate, and with each step that it stepped and each leap that it leapt a recital of its future reward and the wicked's requital ran through its brain with this refrain: *Out, damned fleas and curséd mites! Afflicted be all parasites for their itches and their bites!*”) He uses Balak's peregrinations to satirize different elements of Jerusalem's Jewish and non-Jewish population. He comments by means of Balak on human credulity, on the genesis of folk beliefs, on the Hebrew spoken in Palestine. (Since a mad dog in rabbinic language is *kelev shoteh*, not *kelev m'shuga*, Balak, we are told, cannot be mad in any traditional sense.) He parodies anthropomorphic religious thought with a cosmogonic myth of Balak's own making, according to which the earth and sky were created by a primeval dog and eagle born from the stomach of a camel. When the sky, frightened by the eagle's screeches, weeps endless tears, filling the seas and flooding the land, the great ancestor dog, perched on the eagle's wings, bites it in retribution, and the rents he makes in it become the moon and stars.

Agnon has great fun with the dog Balak, having him break into the rhymed prose of Hebrew and Arabic medieval narrative.

Biting is increasingly on Balak's mind. As his plight worsens, so does his physical condition. He doesn't feel well. His head hurts. He is thirsty all the time, drinkable water being hard to find since the country is suffering from a drought. He drags his tail between his legs and drools. His timidity gives way to pent-up aggression.

“Ay!” cried Balak in his torment. “Why am I persecuted everywhere? Why is everyone out to kill me? Whom have I harmed? Have I bitten anyone? Why can't I have some peace?” Ahr, ahr, he barked, appealing to the heavens. “Are you going to give me a place to rest? Are you going to give me justice?”

The more he barked, the more he was assailed with sticks and stones. Balak bit the sticks and the stones and went on barking. “Why bite us?” they asked. “Do we have any choice? Bad people grab us and do what they want with us. If you're looking for revenge, go bite them.”

“What am I, a mad dog, that I should go bite people?” Balak asked.

“Then go complain to them,” said the sticks and stones.

“Do you think they care about my complaints?” Balak asked. “They themselves say, ‘Might makes right.’”

“In that case,” said the sticks and stones, “you had better show them your might.”

Balak is also closing in on the culprit responsible for his sufferings. As he roams the city one night, his senses tell him to start digging and he finds one of Yitzhak’s discarded paint brushes.

He sniffed its bristles and his hide tingled as it had on that day when the painter dripped something wet on it. This time, though, it didn’t tingle with pleasure. It tingled with fear. His eyes filled with blood and he let out a sound. It wasn’t a yelp or a yowl or a moan, but something new. It was the sound of vengeance.

Meanwhile, Yitzhak returns to Jerusalem. Having achieved the closure he sought with Sonya, he now feels free to ask for Shifrah’s hand. The scene in which he does this—quite literally, yet without an explicit word—is a marvel of delicacy. Arriving in Jerusalem as evening is falling, he finds a hotel in which he leaves his belongings and hurries to Reb Feysh’s. The small apartment is lit by a lantern.

Shifrah was standing by a basin of water, washing her father’s undershirt. She tugged at her sleeves and raised her eyes to Yitzhak. They were not the golden, dreaming eyes he remembered. Or if they were, their gold was dulled and their dream had no interpreter. But though not the same Shifrah, she was even more beautiful.

Rivkah sat knitting in a corner. At Yitzhak’s appearance, she threw him a wondering glance. “I’m coming from Jaffa,” he said, looking at Shifrah.

Rivkah nodded. “I heard you were there,” she said.

“I’ve just arrived,” Yitzhak said, “and here I am. How is Reb Feysh?”

Rivkah shone the lantern on her husband and sighed.

Reb Feysh lay in bed. The fleshy sacks beneath his sunken eyes twitched. Rivkah looked at her husband and said, “All our enemies should be as well as he is.”

“So nothing has changed,” Yitzhak said.

“Thank God for that,” Rivkah said. “No change could have been for the better.”

Reb Feysh stirred and seemed to stare at Yitzhak. Rivkah moved the lantern away. “Why don’t you sit down?” she asked. “Sit, Yitzhak. So you’re back in Jerusalem. Let me get you some tea.”

“That’s kind of you,” Yitzhak said. “Jaffa is growing by leaps and bounds. A new neighborhood is going up with 60 houses. There’s work for everyone—for me, too.”

“Will you be going back there?” Rivkah asked.

“If you’d like me to,” Yitzhak said, “I will.”

Shifrah blushed and stared at the floor. He rested pleading eyes on her and blushed too.

A dog barked outside. “Go be with your father,” Rivkah told Shifrah. “Whenever Feysh hears a dog bark,” she said to Yitzhak, “he’s frightened.”

.....

The door opened, A neighbor entered, saw Yitzhak, and turned to leave. Holding a lump of sugar, Yitzhak said, “Good woman, there’s no need to run from me.”

He took a last sip of tea, set the sugar on the table, stroked his beard, said “It’s time I was off,” and got to his feet. “Good night,” he said to Rivkah with a nod. He went to Shifrah, took her hand, and said good night to her, too. Rivkah looked on in wonder. “Is this the young man?” the neighbor asked. Yitzhak smiled at her. “It is, it is,” he said, giving Shifrah’s hand a squeeze.

Shifrah withdrew her hand. “Good night,” she said. Yitzhak stroked his beard and departed. Rivkah took the lantern and went to the doorway to light his way. Shifrah stood and listened to his footsteps. When he was gone, Rivkah returned and hung the lantern on its peg.

With which of the understated details in this passage does one begin? With Shifrah’s instinctively obeying the code of modesty she has grown up with by automatically lowering the sleeves she has raised to do the wash even before knowing who the unexpected visitor is? (If it is a woman, there is no need to do this.) With her leaving the conversation entirely to Rivkah, guided by the same code and her trust in her mother? With her eyes that tell us, as they perhaps tell Yitzhak, that she has been suffering from his absence without acknowledging to herself that this has been the cause of her unhappiness? With Yitzhak’s finding her “even more beautiful” because a woman one loves, no matter how wan, is always beautiful? With Rivkah’s first moving the lantern toward Feysh and then away from him because, while she wants Yitzhak to see him, she is worried that, even in his unconscious state, he might see Yitzhak? With Yitzhak’s self-confidence, which he has never exhibited before and now has because he has matured and because, for the first time since coming to Palestine, he feels sure he is doing the right thing? With Rivkah’s warmth toward him despite her fears of social disapproval? (She is under no obligation to be so friendly, much less to offer him the tea that she serves, East European-style, with a lump of sugar to sip it through.) With his twice stroking his beard in a gesture typical of the observant Jew he has become—a conscious or unconscious signal that, consciously or unconsciously, must register on Rivkah and Shifrah? (We have seen Yakov Malkov make this same gesture in his boarding house.) With the narrator’s leaving us to guess what Rivkah hopes or fears to hear when she asks Yitzhak if he plans to return to Jaffa?

Yitzhak’s answer to this question is in effect a proposal of marriage, and Shifrah’s blush conveys that she understands this well. He does not get a response because the bark of a dog (is it Balak?) mercifully spares Rivkah the need to give him one. Yet he has reason to feel

encouraged. When he boldly takes Shifrah's hand before her astonished mother and neighbor with every awareness of what he is doing (neither he nor she has forgotten the time this caused her to flee from him), she does not pull it away at once but only when he squeezes it—and then, too, she returns his “Good night,” watches as her mother goes out of her way to light the dark street for him, and gets up from her seat to listen to him walk off.

Only Yesterday makes Yitzhak and Shifrah clear a few more hurdles before they are wed, but the outcome is no longer in doubt. Abetting it are Rivkah's discovery that Yitzhak is a descendant of the pietist Yudl Hasid (ancestry counts for much in Meah She'arim) and the unexpected support of the wise neighbor who, having discerned the young couple's feelings for each other, urges Rivkah to promote the match. Even then, Meah She'arim is about to boycott the wedding when an eminent rabbi decides to officiate at it in tribute to an old friendship with Rivkah's father. This changes everything, and at the last minute, we are told, “so many neighbors, men, women, and children, came to celebrate with the bride and groom that there wasn't a place left to stand in.”

VIII. A Dog Gone Mad

Yitzhak and Shifrah are blissful. One evening after finishing his work,

Yitzhak was preparing to return home to his wife. His need to be with her was still like a bridegroom's. Shifrah sat alone with her thoughts, marveling how, since the wedding, they had been only of Yitzhak. She looked around as if to detect whether anyone had noticed the change in her. What she saw in the mirror on the wall made her marvel even more. Apart from the married woman's kerchief on her head, nothing about her looked different. And yet she felt like another person. . . . Standing beneath the wedding canopy with Yitzhak, she had been sure there would never again be such a moment in her life. Now, every moment was its equal. She went to the stove to check the dinner she had cooked and wondered why, though it was ready, Yitzhak was still not home.

Yitzhak has been delayed. On his way home he has encountered a crowd gathered on a corner to listen to a street preacher inveigh against the sins of the age, for which the drought is God's punishment. Suddenly, Balak appears. The crowd scatters in all directions. Yitzhak, who has been in Jaffa and not known of the mad-dog hysteria in Jerusalem, calmly stands his ground and explains when told to flee that there is nothing to be afraid of because—so he shamefacedly confesses—it was he who painted *kelev m'shuga* on Balak's side. Incredulity is followed by a wave of relief.

No one feared the dog any more. And since no one did, no one understood why anyone ever had. In their newfound courage, all mocked the cowards who had run from it. The cowards, in turn, resolutely blamed the newspapers, which had stirred up panic. That was the press for you. It had nothing better to write about and so it wrote about that. One day it scared you with dogs and the next with mosquitoes.

The dog frightened no one, least of all Yitzhak, who had forgotten it the moment he painted it. But the dog had not forgotten him. It understood only too well that it owed all its troubles to the sign painter. It had looked for him everywhere, barking when it saw him and barking when it only imagined that it had. . . . Make sense of it if you can: so long as Balak was in his right mind, he was feared to be mad; now that he wondered if he wasn't going mad, all fear of him was gone.

Balak has indeed gone mad. He has rabies, contracted, it would seem, while playing with the dogs in Jerusalem's Gentile neighborhoods. Face-to-face with Yitzhak as the crowd begins to disperse,

[he] fixed weary eyes on the sign painter's feet and saw they hadn't moved. "Whoever knows the truth," he thought with a sigh, "is afraid of nothing. But the truth is heavy and few can bear its weight—I could help him to bear it."

Yitzhak stood there crestfallen, like a man awaiting sentence. He noticed the dog, snapped his fingers at it, and said, "Did you hear what they said about you? They said you were mad." He hadn't meant to offend Balak; he just needed someone to talk to and was too ashamed to talk to anyone else. Balak, though, thought otherwise. He glanced up at Yitzhak in alarm, the whites of his eyes vanishing and their pupils turning black. His mouth foamed and his teeth shook in their sockets. Then he shook all over. He wanted to jump on Yitzhak. In the end, he looked back down and nuzzled the ground.

Yitzhak turns to go home.

Balak wagged his head and thought, "He has somewhere to go—and I'm an outcast with nowhere, despised and downtrodden." His tongue hung from his mouth as if about to fall out. He tried putting it back in place and couldn't. Something sweet trickled between his teeth. His other senses in abeyance, a craving bubbled up there like a spring. Every tooth stood on edge. His body stiffened. Before Yitzhak could walk off, the dog leaped on him and sank its teeth into him. Having bitten him, it took to its legs and ran off.

Yitzhak returns home, falls ill, and dies after several weeks of frightful torment. "And we, dear friends," laments the narrator, "are left dumbfounded when we regard all that befell Yitzhak. Why was this man, who was no worse than any other, punished in such a fashion?"

Balak wagged his head and thought, "He has somewhere to go—and I'm an outcast with nowhere, despised and downtrodden."

But there is a silver lining in the clouds that form on the day of Yitzhak's funeral. Soon they begin to pour. The drought is over. It rains and rains. When the rain finally stops,

every bush and blade of grass gave off a good smell, most of all the orange trees. The entire country was a blessed garden of God's and blessed were all its inhabitants. And you, our stalwart brothers in Kinneret and Merhavia, in Eyn-Ganim and Um-Guni, as Degania once was called, went to work in your fields and

gardens, doing what our friend Yitzhak was not privileged to do. Our friend Yitzhak never got to plow, sow, and farm. And yet like his ancestor Reb Yudel and other pious Jews, he was granted a grave in the Holy Land. Let the mourners mourn this suffering soul who died badly. We prefer to tell of our brothers and sisters, the sons and daughters of God's people, who tilled the earth of Israel to their everlasting glory.

Yitzhak's adventures are done.
The annals of our other comrades will be told
in the book of *The Field that Was*.

Such a book was never written.

IX. The Timeliness of *Only Yesterday*

Although not all have chosen to read it in such a manner, *Only Yesterday's* ending, with its sentimental description of a life of happy toil on "the earth of Israel," is pure parody. It matches that of the novel's beginning, the two framing the story between them like twin bookends. This may seem an odd thing for Agnon to have done with what is not, despite all its humor, a comedy. But Agnon was a writer who liked to toy with his readers and never shrank from the risk—indeed, he enjoyed courting it—of being misunderstood by them. One might say, only partly tongue-in-cheek, that *Only Yesterday* was written to fool the bookstore browser who weighs a purchase on the basis of its first and last paragraphs.

There is a fundamental difference between these paragraphs, however. *Only Yesterday's* opening lines ridicule Yitzhak Kummer's rosy picture of conditions in Palestine at the time he sets out for it. Ultimately disappointed by a life in Jaffa that is not like the one he imagined, Yitzhak moves to Jerusalem, reverts to religion, and ends up in anti-Zionist Meah She'arim, where he perishes, as it were, by his own hands, having set in motion the events that lead to his death. One can analyze his character and motives from many angles, and Agnon's critics have done so at length, but this remains the novel's bare synopsis.

Only Yesterday's last lines, on the other hand, come after Yitzhak's death and do not reflect his point of view. They express that of the nameless narrator, a shadowy presence who regularly refers to "our friend Yitzhak." What about him, or the collective "we" of the Second Aliyah in whose name he speaks, is Agnon burlesquing?

The parody of *Only Yesterday's* ending is aimed at the Labor Zionist ideology that over-mythologized the figure of the pioneer.

It certainly isn't the Second Aliyah's *halutsim*, for whom Agnon had great respect. Rather, it seems an inescapable conclusion, the parody of *Only Yesterday's* ending is aimed at the Labor Zionist ideology that romanticized and mythologized the figure of the *haluts*, making it a yardstick by which all other forms of Zionism were judged lacking.

“Many a critic,” writes Amos Oz, “has found ample grounds in *Only Yesterday* for generalizations about the Second Aliyah, . . . which seemingly broke with religion, family, and Tradition only to break in the end [in individuals like Yitzhak] with its own pioneering ideals”—“seemingly” because Oz’s understanding of Yitzhak is of someone who never really broke with his past at all. The values Yitzhak grew up with, Oz writes, remain *his* yardstick, so that “from the shtetl proceed all his fantasies of the shade-giving vines and fig trees of Palestine, and to the shtetl they return.” He and his friends in Jaffa “will never be reborn or shake off the dust of exile. On the contrary: they will carry it with them wherever they go.”

Unlike the pioneers of Kinneret and Degania, in other words, Yitzhak is unwilling or unable to remake himself radically and is thus sucked back into the world of religion in its most regressive form. He has tried to live by a “naïve synthesis,” as Oz puts it, of Jewish tradition with the revolutionary ideals of the Second Aliyah, and when this synthesis breaks down, as it must because of its internal contradictions, he reverts to where he has come from and then some.

Such would indeed appear to be the narrator’s judgment of Yitzhak at the conclusion of *Only Yesterday*. Oz’s seconding of it, however, is surprising given the astute reader that he is, because it is a judgment that is meant, as I have said, to be laughed at. The novel’s closing clichés are as mawkish as its opening ones. Substitute the communes of the Second Aliyah for the First Aliyah colonies that Yitzhak Kummer has read about and the two passages are highly similar.

Oz accepts at face value the narrator’s insistence in *Only Yesterday* that Yitzhak’s fateful mistake was not having become the pioneer that he dreamed of being. In this, the narrator is faithful to the Labor Zionist portrait, never more widely accepted than it was in the 1940s when *Only Yesterday* was written, of the *haluts* as an unequalled paradigm of Zionist self-fulfillment in whom the trapped religious energies of Judaism were freed and rechanneled into Zionist fervor and construction.

But while this may be the narrator’s opinion in *Only Yesterday*, it is not Agnon’s. The whole issue of Yitzhak’s failure to become a *haluts*, I would submit, is a red herring that is repeatedly dragged through the novel in order to throw us off the trail. Becoming a housepainter in Jaffa rather than a field hand in Degania was hardly, after all, a negation of Zionism. The Yishuv needed housepainters, too, and could no more have succeeded without Jewish workers in Palestine’s cities than without Jewish farmers in its countryside; in fact, a very small percentage of Zionist immigrants to Palestine in the years in which *Only Yesterday* takes place ended up living in agricultural settlements. Yitzhak’s feelings of guilt at not being one of them are real, but they tell us only about his failed expectations of himself, not about his failure as a Zionist. In denying him his Zionist credentials and classing him with his ancestor Yudel Hasid, who came to Palestine in order to die and be buried there, the narrator simplistically echoes Brenner’s declaration of “Except for the farmers, my friends, except for the farmers, it’s all humbug, humbug, humbug!”

In truth, if Yitzhak makes a mistake, it is, like the narrator, to buy into this belief, which is mocked by *Only Yesterday*’s ending just as he himself is mocked by its beginning. Challenging us at the last moment to see through a narrator whose good sense we have trusted until then is the sort of game Agnon delighted in playing. There are other examples of this in his work, the most germane being the conclusion of his 1951 novel *To This Day*, set during World War I

in Berlin. Its story, too, is told by a sophisticated observer who, keenly aware of the foibles of others, ends his account with an unwitting exposure of his own foolishness that forces the perceptive reader to rethink what he has read.

What we are asked to rethink upon reaching the end of *Only Yesterday*, in my view, is whether the generalization Agnon makes in it may not be the opposite of the one Oz attributes to him. Yitzhak's regression to Meah She'arim does not come from his inability to "shake off the dust of exile." It comes from shaking off too much of it by throwing religion and its values overboard in a Jaffa in which his friends do not even say kaddish for their fathers. This undermines his Jewish and human equilibrium, and in an attempt to regain it, he lurches too far in the other direction.

Although Yitzhak's story is unique, he himself is portrayed in the novel as anything but that. "He made," the narrator tells us,

no special impression on anyone. There were many young men like Yitzhak, none of whom drew the slightest attention. There was nothing unusual about his appearance or conversation. Talking with him left you with no great desire to do it again, and it was possible to encounter him in a public place and not recognize him. Unless you happened to be fond of him, you didn't notice he was there.

Yitzhak is a Zionist Everyman, even if what happens to him does not happen to every Zionist. His life is his own; his fate, if we are to regard it as more than just a curiosity that would hardly justify a 600-page novel, must be evocative of something greater.

But what? Agnon wrote *Only Yesterday* in Jerusalem during the years of World War II, when the Old Yishuv was a much smaller part of the city's population than it had been in 1910. By then, it had long lost its battle with the New Yishuv. In Palestine as elsewhere, religion was assumed to be on the wane before the wave of a secular future. Non-observant Jews turning or returning to a life of Jewish observance were extremely rare. Although the irony of a young Zionist coming to Palestine in the early 20th century only to be swallowed up by an ultra-Orthodox quarter of Jerusalem would not have been lost on Agnon's Palestinian readers, it would not have symbolized anything significant in the world they knew.

Indeed, Agnon's readers in 1945 could only have been puzzled and disappointed by the apparent absence in *Only Yesterday* of the great and terrible concerns of the day: the cataclysmic world war that had just been fought, its murder of European Jewry, the desperate struggle for a Jewish state that lay ahead, in which victory was far from assured. How could the greatest living Hebrew author, as Agnon was already regarded at the time, have spent the years in which this was happening in the company of a character as trivial as Yitzhak Kummer?

Perhaps the answer lies with Balak.

Balak has puzzled readers of *Only Yesterday* even more than Yitzhak has. What is he doing in the novel? Agnon was well aware that this question would be asked. In a chapter that he wrote and decided to delete, he addressed it and the reader directly:

I know you're displeased with me for mixing one thing with another and confusing animals with human beings. In your opinion, dear reader, I should have

kept Yitzhak and the dog apart and made of them two separate stories. Moreover, you're annoyed at me for letting a dog talk and giving him language in which to think about things that no bird or beast has the slightest need to think about, . . . [especially since] a shrewd critic has already established that horses do not speak like people.

The identity of this critic would have to be searched for, but the horse alluded to is clearly that of Mendele Mokher Sforim's novella *The Mare*, first written in Yiddish in 1873 and later rewritten in Hebrew, in which the animal of the title is a personification of the Jewish people. Most critics of Agnon have rejected such a view of Balak and offered other interpretations of him. He is Yitzhak's alter ego; he is Yitzhak's repressed erotic and aggressive self; he is a demonic force let loose on a helpless world; he is the eternal victim of inscrutable Fate; he is all these of things and still more; he is none of them, being only a dog. And a marvelous dog he is, sniffing, scratching, squatting, rolling in the dirt, barking, growling, yelping and yowling, cocking his ears and dragging his tail as dogs do.

Nothing is more Jewish about Balak than the way the world seeks to kill him without any reason that he can discern.

Still, he is, as has been observed, a very Jewish dog, and nothing is more Jewish about him than the way the world fears him, reviles him, drives him into exile, hounds him from place to place, and seeks to kill him without any reason that he can discern. Can it be a coincidence that Agnon wrote about him during World War II? Is it conceivable that he could have created Balak without having had Europe's Jews in mind?

I think not. *Only Yesterday* is a book written in the shadow of the Holocaust.

Falsely thought by his persecutors to be mad, Balak becomes mad. The Jewish people, though it had every reason during and after the Holocaust to go mad, too, remained remarkably sane. But madness, like rabies, incubates before it appears. If the first great fear expressed in *Only Yesterday* is that a Zionism that is too secular will one day swing like a pendulum to its opposite extreme, the second is that sooner or later, today or tomorrow, a madness contracted from Jewish history will break out among Jews and claim them as its victims, as Yitzhak is Balak's victim and Balak is Yitzhak's. Not even love (for who can doubt Yitzhak and Shifrah's?) will save them then.

Agnon, the wiliest of all Hebrew authors, believed in the synthesis that Amos Oz calls naïve and was apprehensive for a Zionism that rejected or failed to achieve it, just as he was apprehensive for a Hebrew language detached from its roots. In terms of the great debate between the great Zionist thinker [Ahad Ha'am](#) and Micha Yosef Berdichevsky that continues to rage, in one form or another, in Israel to this day, Agnon was an Ahad Ha'amian like Bialik as opposed to a Berdichevskyan like Brenner, with the latter of whom he had a strong personal bond. Yet unlike Ahad Ha'am and Bialik, he was an observant Jew, though one who had lapsed during his years in Jaffa.

When he returned to religion, however, he did not do so like Yitzhak. The Orthodoxy he practiced until his death in Jerusalem in 1970 was a measured one. Indeed, the more one reads him, the more impossible it becomes to determine whether his Judaism was a matter of

faith, ancestral loyalty, cultural conviction, inborn conservatism, a deliberately chosen bulwark against disorder, or some combination of these things. He had no more qualms about turning his accomplished sense of irony against this Judaism than about turning it against anything else.

Irony, present in all of his work, was a balancing act for Agnon, keeping him equidistant from everything he wrote about, and a careful sense of balance characterized everything he wrote, from his language and sentence structure to his delineations of character and fictional plots. *Only Yesterday* is a novel about the loss of balance in one young man and its possible loss in an entire people. It did not strike its readers in 1945 as timely. It may strike some of them as more so today.