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“There’s No Place Like Home”: Canine Fellow Travelers in Kafka and Agnon

When the first Zionists came to Palestine they encountered “an Old Yishuv of a few thousand Orthodox Jews [...] the most abject, parasitic aspect of Jewish Diaspora life.”¹ Franz Kafka’s (1883–1924) *Jackals and Arabs* (1917) depicts the Jewish inhabitants as wild, desperate, and shockingly intolerant jackals who horrify a European traveler, while the Arabs see them as “our dogs; finer dogs than any of yours.”² A decade later, Kafka’s jackals find their equivalent in Balak (*kelev*, i.e. “dog,” in Hebrew, in reverse), the cursed, mangy Diaspora dog that haunts S.Y. Agnon’s (1888–1970) novel *Only Yesterday* (1945).³ Both texts are situated in Pre-Mandate Palestine, where the canine animal metaphors embody not only Alterity but also represent social satires of Diaspora mindsets and Zionist ideology. The cliché, “there’s no place like home,” provides the ironic background for the representation of humans and their canine fellow travelers from the European Diaspora to the Pre-Mandate period in Palestine, until the period of the British Mandate in the early nineteen twenties.

Kafka’s *Jackals and Arabs* was written in January 1917 and published in mid-October of the same year in Martin Buber’s Zionist journal *Der Jude*. The story draws on the history of the first (1882–1903) and second (1904–1914) *aliyot* (immigration waves) and depicts Jewish inhabitants in Palestine as ferocious jackals (canine mammals), who are religious fanatics, backward rather than forward looking, and in constant strife with the local Arabs. The jackals may well refer to the Orthodox Old Yishuv and include descendants of those immigrants who came long ago, “mostly old Jews, who came ‘to die in the Holy Land,’ yet raised families and maintained a Jewish presence, mainly in Jerusalem

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- 1 Harshav, Benjamin: *The Only Yesterday of Only Yesterday: Introduction*, in: Agnon, Shmuel Yosef: *Only Yesterday*. Trans. Barbara Harshav, Princeton 2000, p. vii–xxix.
 - 2 Kafka, Franz: *Jackals and Arabs*, in: *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum Norbert Glatzer, New York 1988, p. 407–411, here p. 410. Quotations from this edition are referenced in parentheses and marked CS. For the original German see Kafka, Franz: *Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, ed. Roger Hermes, Frankfurt a. M. 2014, p. 280–284. Pages in this edition are marked E.
 - 3 Agnon, *Only Yesterday*. Quotations from this edition are referenced in parentheses and marked OY.

and Safed.”⁴ The new Zionist immigrants of the first *aliya* (1882–1903), however, were farmers who worked on the land for a living and regarded the pathetic existence of these predecessors as “the most abject, parasitic aspect of Jewish Diaspora life.”⁵ With the second *aliya* (1904–1914) came the intellectuals and labor Zionists, “secular idealists, mostly Socialist Zionists from Russia.”⁶ Kafka’s Western visitor in *Jackals and Arabs* arrives after the second *aliya*, during World War I and on the eve of the Balfour Declaration (2 November 1917), in which Britain supported the Zionist goal of establishing a national homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine.

Jens Hanssen regards *Jackals and Arabs* as a “postcolonial allegory” which reveals that “Kafka stood outside the Zionist frenzy for Palestine.”⁷ Taking issue with previous scholars for not seeing Kafka “as a critic of colonialism in general or of settler-Zionism in Palestine in particular,” Hanssen posits that *Jackals* “represents a rare European account [...] in which the violent nature of Zionism’s designs on Palestine is countered by an Arab protagonist whose narrative of resistance [...] Kafka renders empathetically.”⁸ However, even though Kafka parodies the jackals’ religious frenzy, they are neither violent nor overtly Zionist. They are clearly creatures of the Diaspora, who have brought their psychological baggage, their paranoia of persecution, to the land of Israel and seem to remain, forever, victims of their Diaspora mentality.

In Kafka’s satire the annoying religious jackals are entirely out of touch with modernity. They lose themselves in a messianic frenzy, immediately latching onto the traveler as their savior: “We’ve been waiting endless years for you; my mother waited for you, and her mother, and all our foremothers right back to the first mother of all the jackals. It is true, believe me!” (CS 408) This mock religious discourse parodies their messianic recruitment effort. The traveler cannot take them seriously, nor can the Arab leader. As a matter of fact, the European Zionists rejected this Diaspora attitude and wanted a sane, new beginning in Palestine. The jackal metaphor itself derives from antisemitic European discourses, which Zionists frequently employed in their critiques of the Diaspora mindset.⁹ Thus, *Jackals and Arabs* is on one level of meaning a devastating critique of the Diaspora Jews for whom nothing has changed in the land of Israel.

4 Harshav: *Only Yesterday*, p. x.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. vii.

7 Hanssen, Jens: *Kafka and Arabs*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2012), p. 167–197, here p. 179, 188.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 173, 169.

9 Bruce, Iris: *Kafka and Cultural Zionism: Dates in Palestine*, Madison 2007, p. 80–81.

Ironically, the Northern visitor may be an acculturated “German-speaking Prague Jew,”¹⁰ perhaps even a Zionist. Both would be appalled by this apparition from the stone ages. The traveler may also be a parody of the famous Zionist leader Max Nordau (1849–1923). An allusion to Nordau in the traveler from the North would be especially ironic: he, who changed his name from Südfeld (southern field) to Nordau (northern meadow) to “break with the [Diasporic] past,”¹¹ now in Palestine encounters a nightmare of diaspora jackals that literally bite into his clothes and will not let him go.

The jackals’ messianism is also more than a satire of one Zionist leader. By extension, it can be read as a scathing satire of the political Zionist leadership’s desperate search for European political leaders to support the Zionist aspirations to create a national homeland in Palestine. The Arab informs the Western visitor that he is not the only one whom they have taken to be their true redeemer: “Every European is offered it [the scissors for ‘sacrificing’ the Arabs] for the great work; every European is just the man that Fate has chosen for them” (CS 410). The Northern visitor and those who were approached before him “represent the European powers pursuing an imperial interest in Palestine and the Middle East, upon whose support political Zionism relied blindly.”¹² The jackals reaching out to every European then becomes a parody of the many negotiations that finally led to the Balfour declaration. As John Milfull said long ago: “That this bitter satire of Zionist messianism should have been published in Martin Buber’s periodical *Der Jude* is in many ways the high point of Kafka’s irony.”¹³

Hanssen shifts the focus and places the emphasis on the representation of the Arab leader: “Kafka’s Arab stands – problematically ‘high and white’ – in the literary center of a leading Zionist journal.”¹⁴ Indeed, the ultimate irony in this satire of political, messianic Zionism is that Kafka’s Jews are represented as uncivilized animals, whereas the Arab seems very civilized and reasonable when he shows the “enlightened” Northern visitor around. This role reversal, when it comes to the power constellation of Arab and Jew, is not typical of the time: Kafka is criticizing here the common negative depiction of Arabs in European/Zionist intellectual circles. He was thoroughly familiar with Zionist racism, as

10 Spector, Scott: Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka’s Fin-de-Siècle, Berkeley 2000, p. 197.

11 Bruce: Kafka and Cultural Zionism, p. 154, 185.

12 Shumsky, Dimitry: Czechs, Germans, Arabs, Jews: Franz Kafka’s “Jackals and Arabs” between Bohemia and Palestine, in: AJS Review 33 (2009), p. 71–100, here p. 97.

13 Milfull, John: The Messiah and the Direction of History: Walter Benjamin, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Franz Kafka, in: Obermayer, August (ed.): Festschrift für E. W. Herd, Dunedin 1980, p. 180–187, here p. 185, 184.

14 Hanssen: Kafka and Arabs, p. 184.

seen, for instance, in the writer Arthur Holitscher's (1869–1941) description of Arabs, in 1921, as “a primitive monster, separated from Western man by an abyss a thousand years wide.”¹⁵ Dimitry Shumsky attributes Kafka's reversal of contemporary Zionist racism to Kafka's exposure to the positive representations of Arabs by his friend Hugo Bergmann and the Zionist newspaper *Selbstwehr* (Self-Defence).¹⁶ In his eagerness to condemn Zionist colonialism, Hanssen makes no distinction between different kinds of contemporary European Zionism. Bergmann, a cultural and not a political Zionist, firmly believed that “phenomena identified with modernization, such as industrialization and the development of trade and infrastructure, had already begun among Palestine's local population,” and he “saw a Palestinian Arab [...] closely resembling a citizen of a modern European nation in the making.”¹⁷

Shumsky convincingly argues that readers saw “an unmistakable European” in the Arab's “upright” and “white” (“hoch und weiß”, E 280) figure: this contemporary Palestinian Arab has a “European appearance, at least with regard to the national-modern outline of his physiognomy.”¹⁸ The Arab leader's upright pose and demeanour indeed suggests Arab self-confidence, pride, and national consciousness; however, the color “weiß” in the Middle Eastern context may equally refer to the traditional white Arab garment rather than to his lighter skin color. The jackals do not stress for nothing: “Filtth is their white [ihr Weiß]; filth is their black [ihr Schwarz]” (CS 410, E 283) – the two types of garments for Arabs/Bedouins. The capitalization of white and black in the original German suggests that the colors refer to their outward appearance, and the “filth” to what is underneath. When we look closer beyond the white cover, the Arab is not as “white” and civilized underneath as he initially appeared, just as the Jews as well are not only innocent victims but also fuel the racial problems.

The jackals make a point of informing the traveler of their scorn for the Arabs: “You are indeed a stranger here [...] or you would know that never in the history of the world has any jackal been afraid of an Arab. Why should we fear them? Is it not misfortune enough for us to be exiled among such creatures?” (CS 408) They adopt a self-satisfied and self-righteous stance and flatly deny the Arabs any legitimation for their views, projecting a presumptuous and calculating nature onto them that has no place for “reason”: “Not a spark of intelligence, let me tell you, can be struck from their cold arrogance” (CS 408). The jackals' arrogant rejection of the Arabs is absolutely closed-minded: they refuse to talk to the

15 Holitscher, Arthur: *Reise durch das jüdische Palästina*, Berlin 1922, p. 79. My translation.

16 See Bergmann, S. Hugo: *Bemerkungen zur arabischen Frage*, in: *Palästina* 8 (1911), p. 7–9.

17 Shumsky: *Czechs, Germans, Arabs, Jews*, p. 92.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Arabs, insisting that communication is impossible and instead “turn tail and flee into cleaner air, into the desert” (CS 409).

As expected, the “enlightened” traveler becomes rather anxious when he learns that they want him “to end this quarrel that divides the world” (CS 409) and “slit their [the Arabs’] throats through with these scissors!” (CS 410) Kafka parodies the entire scene when a jackal comes “trotting up with a small pair of sewing scissors, covered with ancient rust, dangling from an eye tooth” (CS 410). Their performance for the visitor is comical with the dangling rusty sewing scissors that are ritually unclean and ludicrously inappropriate for ritual slaughter. Hanssen exaggerates when he justifies the Arab’s “corporal violence” as a form of “self-defense against the jackals’ threat of murder, what would today be called ethnic cleansing”¹⁹ and misses Kafka’s irony and humor. The jackals are satirized for being “too cowardly and weak to draw this blood themselves.”²⁰

Kafka further parodies the jackal’s madness through playful word games. The jackals are so obsessed with making the visitor perform the ritual slaughter of the Arabs that they literally “locked their teeth through [the traveler’s] coat and shirt” (CS 409) so that he cannot get away. The entire paragraph plays with the verb combinations “festgebissen,” “eingebissen,” and “wir haben nur das Gebiß” (CS 409, E 282), which makes a German reader conclude that the jackals are totally “verbissen” (a pun which has the figurative meaning of being “entrenched, deadlocked, obsessed”). Shumsky points out that Hugo Bergmann criticized the Zionist settlers he met on his first visit to Palestine in 1910 for being “entrenched in their position of Eurocentric alienation in relation to the local Arab environment.”²¹ Indeed, Kafka’s jackals are so “verbissen” (entrenched) that they are as responsible for the racial divide as the Arabs. Moreover, once the Arab caravan leader disperses them with his “great whip” (“seine riesige Peitsche”), they are all huddled together surrounded by “flickering will- o’-the-wisps” (“von Irrlichtern umflogen”, CS 410, E 283), which reveals the error of their ways.

The jackals are no threat: they are totally absorbed by their obsessions. It is not difficult for the Arab to anticipate their reactions. There is no indication in the text either that the Arab “sees through the jackals’ attempt to instrumentalize the European in order to cleanse Arabs from the land.”²² Besides, the Arab leader is all along entirely in control of the situation. Even though he seems to have retired to get some sleep, it turns out that he was just waiting in the background for the right moment to sneak up on them and end the jackal’s “per-

19 Hanssen: Kafka and Arabs, p. 184.

20 Gilman, Sander L.: Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient, New York 1995, p. 151.

21 Shumsky: Czechs, Germans, Arabs, Jews, p. 97.

22 Ibid., p. 185.

formance”: all of a sudden the Arab leader appears out of nowhere, he “had crept upwind towards us and now cracked his great whip” (“der sich gegen den Wind an uns herangeschlichen hatte und nun seine riesige Peitsche schwang,” CS 410, E 283). The whole event was staged for the Western visitor.

Hanssen rightly argues that Kafka recognizes “the Arabs on their own terms” because their leader is educated, analytic, self-confident and therefore the European traveler’s equal.²³ However, the Arab caravan leader does not escape Kafka’s irony either. Despite his elegant and polite outward appearance, he is not so civilized in his emotional reactions and his abuse of power. True, the Palestinian Arabs are represented as powerful because they are on their own land and in control. But from his position of power, the Arab leader is condescending throughout and ridicules the jackals all the time. He wanted the European visitor to witness the jackals’ performance, and when he finally intervenes, it is obvious that he never seriously felt threatened or in danger: he is “laughing as gaily as the reserve of his race permitted” (er “lachte so fröhlich, als es die Zurückhaltung seines Stammes erlaubte,” CS 410, E 283). The Arab leader is delighted that he was able to stage this performance so that the visitor can see for himself what the jackals are really like. And when we consider that they actually appear to be “ritual murderers in this ironic replay of the anti-Semitic stereotypes of the day,”²⁴ then the Arab’s happy laughter endorses and makes light of European antisemitism.

Moreover, the Arab freely uses antisemitic discourse when he tells the Northerner that it is the jackals’ “profession” [Beruf] to drain blood out of animals. Their “profession” of blood-letting echoes the antisemitic charges and fantasies of ritual murder and ritual slaughter associated with Jews in European Diaspora societies. Finally, during the World War I period in which Kafka wrote this story, and especially after the Balfour declaration, racist, antisemitic sentiments in Palestine grew, and the militant slogan – “Palestine is our land, and the Jews our dogs” – could be heard in the towns.²⁵ The Arab leader in Kafka’s story repeats this racial slur: “They are our dogs; finer dogs than any of yours” (CS 410). Hanssen quotes this phrase twice, without addressing the clear echo of contemporary Arab antisemitism.²⁶

Ultimately, the Arab’s layer of civilization is a thin veneer, for he becomes brutal in an instant and reaches for the whip. Hanssen emphasizes that “Kafka’s

23 Hanssen: *Kafka and Arabs*, p. 191.

24 Gilman, Sander L.: *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient*, New York 1995, p. 151.

25 Arthur Holitscher reports that these kinds of slogans “reverberated throughout Jerusalem during the time of the November pogrom of 1921”. Holitscher: *Reise*, p. 85. My translation.

26 Hanssen: *Kafka and Arabs*, p. 179, 187.

Arab feels, thinks, hesitates, and convinces.”²⁷ So do the jackals, though they do not convince anyone. But the caravan leader does not entirely “convince” the European visitor either. As soon as the traveler sees the jackals he immediately notices their “lithe bodies moving nimbly and rhythmically, as if at the crack of a whip” (CS 407), which conjures up an image of a performance in a circus arena. The constant whipping defines their whole body language, and as a result of their treatment the jackals are filled with scorn and hatred. The Arab’s final words testify to this: “Marvellous creatures, aren’t they? And how they hate us!” (CS 411) The Northern traveler sees and understands how the jackals are trapped in a continual exile, but his timid attempt to mediate is not very effective. When the Arab leader resorts to brutality again, the traveler takes him by the arm (“I stayed his arm,” CS 411), upon which the Arab drops the whip and even agrees with him, “‘You are right, sir,’ said he” (CS 411). Yet, without the European’s presence, he would not have stopped. All the Northerner achieves, then, is a brief moment of peace for the jackals: otherwise, the future looks bleak in Theodor Herzl’s promised land.

Kafka’s howling, whining jackals find an equivalent in Balak, a mangy, stray Diaspora dog in Ottoman Palestine who haunts Agnon’s novel *Only Yesterday* (1945). Though written mostly during World War II,²⁸ Agnon’s novel is set in the same time period as *Jackals and Arabs* and is also a satire of contemporary Zionism, especially of the second *aliya*. Agnon’s dog Balak not only becomes as desperate, paranoid, and ferocious as Kafka’s jackals, but he is equally impure. There is nothing sacred anymore about Kafka’s fanatically religious jackals that devour unkosher animals, like the camel at the end of the story, without a second thought. As for Agnon’s dog, it “carries the weight of a discourse in which it is seen as an impure animal, a figure of derided alterity, permitted only grudgingly by rabbinical literature.”²⁹ Fittingly, Agnon’s description of Balak’s personal history appears in the chapter “Study of Impurity” and begins with “[I]n the beginning was the camel” (OY 500), parodying the biblical creation story as well as the dog’s impurity.³⁰

Balak “has been interpreted as “an allegory of Jewish Exile, [...] as a satire of [Jerusalem’s] outlandish Orthodox society, as a Kafkaesque parable and a Sur-

27 Ibid., p. 186.

28 For the composition of the novel see Cohen, Uri S.: *Only Yesterday: A Hebrew Dog and the Colonial Dynamics in Pre-Mandate Palestine*, in: Zalashik, Rakefet/Ackerman-Lieberman, Phillip (eds.): *Jew’s Best Friend?* Brighton 2013, p. 156–178, here p. 157.

29 Ibid., p. 159.

30 I owe this insight to Gershon Shaked. See Shaked, Gershon: *Kafka and Agnon: Their Relationship to Judaism and Zionism*, in: Gelber, Mark H. (ed.): *Kafka, Zionism, and Beyond*, Tübingen 2004, p. 239–257, here p. 245.

realist vision; and he is probably all of those combined.”³¹ Agnon’s protagonist, the recent immigrant Isaac Kumer,³² meets the dog Balak, a native of Palestine, during World War I. At the time of the “creation” Kumer is described “like an artist whose hand approaches his work” (OY 286), as he is painting “kelev meshugga” (Mad Dog) on Balak’s skin. When he has finished his “art,” “Isaac looked at the dog and was happy” (OY 287), echoing the Bible’s “God saw that it was good.” But nothing is good for Balak ever after, the reverse is true.

From the beginning the Hebrew writing on his back is a subject for interpretation, the cause of confusion, misunderstandings, and an outlet for Agnon’s satire and humour. Thus, Balak receives his name from a well-meaning French teacher from the “Alliance Israel” school, actually “the principal” who forgets to read Hebrew from right to left: he “saw the letters, took a pair of glasses and matched them up with his eyes, and started reading, as was his wont from left to right. He connected the letters and joined them: BLK, and read: Balak. He smiled [...]” (OY 302–303). The act of naming is based on an error, the written script is reversed, and the narrator comments ironically: “Well, then, we can call him Balak, too [...] perhaps he had a name [...] and perhaps he didn’t have a name” (OY 303). This double creation story may be funny, but just as Balak is *kelev* in reverse, in the novel everything that occurs is the opposite of what individuals expected: they cannot find new ground, there is no job for Kumer on the land (OY 43, 47, 106), Arabs are hired instead for cheap labor (OY 56, 62, 427) and Kumer is never able to realize his dream (OY 639). Besides natural disasters like the 1915 locust plague (OY 536), individuals die of illness and disease (malaria, dysentery, influenza, OY 44, 313, 374, 461); there is hypocrisy, opportunism, strife and trouble; and more Quarrels than one can count: many pioneers from the second *aliya* are leaving the country (OY 91, 347), moving back to Europe, going in the reverse direction. Mad Dog is also a metaphor for a mad Palestine.

It can be argued that Kumer – like Kafka’s Northern visitor – “adopts (like many other Zionists) a ‘Western’ or ‘Westernized’ gaze in encountering Palestine and its natives both Jew and Arab.”³³ Kumer’s inscription, “kelev meshugga” (Mad Dog), creates the perception all around that Balak is mad. The writing becomes a curse, and Balak suffers unending persecution until he really goes mad. In Kafka’s *Jackals*, the enlightened Northern visitor and the enlightened,

31 Harshav: *Only Yesterday*, p. xiii.

32 Kumer’s name is “an allusion to the Biblical Isaac joined with the *newcomer* Kumer, see Shaked: *Kafka and Agnon*, p. 252. Kumer’s last name means, in Yiddish, “the one who comes, arrives” and also “grief, sorrow.” See also Oz, *Amos: The Silence of Heaven: Agnon’s Fear of God*, Princeton 2012, p. 63.

33 Cohen, *Only Yesterday*, p. 164.

Westernized, self-confident Arab both perceive and represent the jackals as mad: the jackals' unbridgeable alterity causes their persecution by the Arabs (and the Europeans before them) and puts off the Western observer as well. But "Balak's madness has little to do with his own mind and everything to do with what he is inscribed with – thus, it is precisely what can be read onto the Jew, denying his native-ness."³⁴ The same is true of the jackals, who have become mad as a result of centuries of misperception.

As an allegory of Jewish Exile, and because *Only Yesterday* was largely composed during World War II, Balak's inscription and persecution also allude to the Holocaust: "in fact, a sign uncannily like 'Dog' marked the Jew – 'Jude'."³⁵ Yet, thematically, the metaphor of inscription equally points to a theme that Agnon shares with Kafka: the loss of tradition and the critique of modernity. Balak's writing is in Hebrew calligraphy and echoes a practice in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, where a script with many flourishes, which resembles Hebrew letters, is engraved on the back of prisoners,³⁶ who, like Agnon's dog, cannot read the script: literally (because it is on their backs) and also symbolically, because they are secular and unable to decipher the sacred script.³⁷ Like Agnon's dog, and Kafka's jackals, the abject prisoners in the penal colony are made to "feel" the meaning of the words "am eigenen Leibe" (a German metaphorical expression, to "learn something the hard way, first-hand"; here, literally, "experiencing something on your own body").³⁸

Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* is directly linked to French colonialism and the Dreyfus affair at the turn of the century.³⁹ Here, a Western traveler is shown around by a representative of the old commandant who attempts to gain Western support of their colonial (execution) practices – a torture machine which inscribes their transgressions on the prisoners' bodies – which the modern commandant considers barbaric and wants outlawed. Though the Western visitor distances himself from both sides and leaves, there is an obvious critique of European colonialism in this story. *Only Yesterday*, in turn, has been linked to Zionist colonialism. For Cohen "the inscribed dog can also be read as a colonial subject to a colonial Kumer" (OY 159). Though there is no overt critique of Zionist colonialism and the treatment of Arabs,⁴⁰ Balak himself at times

34 Cohen, *Only Yesterday*, p. 159.

35 Ibid.

36 Kafka, Franz: *In the Penal Colony*, in: *The Complete Stories*, p. 140–167, here p. 149. See also Bruce, *Kafka and Cultural Zionism*, p. 63.

37 Ibid., p. 147–149, 161.

38 Ibid., p. 145.

39 Bruce, *Kafka and Cultural Zionism*, p. 61.

40 The Arab-Jewish interaction is not represented from an anti-Arab point of view. We hear, for

intimates such criticism. When he bites the stones and the dirt that the Jews throw at him, the stones talk and tell him to “go and complain to them. Says Balak, Do they want to hear complaints, you didn’t hear them saying whichever is stronger can take possession” (OY 503), which can imply abusive colonial practices. Moreover, the identical spelling of the Hebrew and Arabic word for “dog” – *kelev* and *kalb* have the same root (KLB),⁴¹ and the name inscribed on Balak, “dog,” can be pronounced both ways – may suggest a parallel colonial reading of the mad dog metaphor, symbolizing both European persecution and expulsion of Jews in Europe, as well as Jewish persecution and expulsion of Arabs in Palestine. For Cohen it is “in Balak and his inscription that we best understand the nature of the Jewish trauma that is reenacted by Zionism in the land of Israel sending its once-considered long-lost brothers (natives) into exile.”⁴² An ironic example of “colonial mimicry,” he continues, is that Herzl’s “remedy is found in the inscription of Zionist maleness on the body of Palestine and Palestinians.”⁴³ Yet, Theodor Herzl can hardly be blamed for the direction political Zionism took after his early death in 1904. Herzl’s Western fairy tale dream in his novel *Altneuland* (*Old-New Land*, 1902) envisioned a peaceful co-existence of Arabs, Jews, men, and women in Palestine.

As Derek Penslar points out, “Zionism was historically and conceptually situated between colonial, anti-colonial, and post-colonial discourse and practice.”⁴⁴ While “Zionist discourse as well as practice conformed in many ways to the colonialist and Orientalist sensibilities of European fin-de-siècle society” and there are “obvious similarities between Zionism and colonialism,”⁴⁵ distinctions need to be made between Palestine in the twentieth century and Israel after the creation of the Jewish State. Zionism was not immediately a colonialist movement because Zionists believed in their “historic, religious and cultural ties to the area known to them as the land of Israel.”⁴⁶ Penslar rightly stresses that these “assumptions of continuity and the claims of return inherent in Zionist ideology

instance, about a place where Kumer wants to settle that “Arabs attacked that place and destroyed it” (OY 40), or as an aside about “our comrade who was killed by Arabs” (OY 117), that many immigrants “rented from Arabs” (OY 205), and that they came to the “marketplace where farmers come to hire laborers. Masses of Arabs came shouting and shrieking, like enemies who come to lay siege to a city [. . .] not for war but for work” (OY 56).

41 I thank Ilan Gross for this insight.

42 Cohen, *Only Yesterday*, p. 161.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 161, 163.

44 Penslar, Derek J.: *Israel: Colonial or Post-Colonial State?* (2003), <http://homes.chasss.utoronto.ca/~ikalmar/illustrx/penslarzionism.htm>, accessed: 24.10.2017.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 4 f.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[were] sincerely held by its exponents".⁴⁷ Kumer, like many of the second *aliya*, came with these beliefs but his dreams were never realized (OY 639).

Many Zionists criticized the way colonization was handled, and there are indeed "aspects of Zionism that resemble anti-colonial national movements,"⁴⁸ such as we see in the cultural Zionism of the group of Zionists around Kafka, Hugo Bergmann, Felix Weltsch, and Max Brod.⁴⁹ Zionism was also "based in concepts of return, restoration, and *re-inscription*."⁵⁰ However, in *Only Yesterday*, "return," "restoration," and "reinscription" are as impossible for Balak as for his alter-ego Kumer. Neither of them can fully "return" and live a new life free of discrimination and suffering. Balak is clearly a "Jewish" dog. Originally from the orthodox quarter Meah Shearim, he is immediately stoned and kicked out after the writing on his skin. Though dogs are unclean for the orthodox, there had been an old tradition when rabbis used them, tying "notes to the tails of black dogs" announcing someone's excommunication and the dogs had been sent throughout the city to warn people to stay away from him" (OY 287). But there is no such religious purpose or meaning in Balak's case, which makes him unique: "Never before had anyone written on the skin of a dog" (OY 287). And Balak is not even black – the color of the cursed dogs –, his hair "looked maybe white or maybe brown or maybe yellow" (OY 286). Yet, he is persecuted because people believe that Kumer's words (*kelev meshugga*) are some kind of prophesy. The reverse is true: the dog becomes crazy as a result of the message that is painted on his body and only because of the prejudice in his social environment.

Profoundly disillusioned with life in Exile, among gentiles, Balak decides to "return" to Meah Shearim. But Agnon parodies his longing for redemption and renders it surreal: "He took one pace and went back two paces. [...] His tail came and went in front of him," and he "went behind his tail. His head came and returned behind him [...] all of Balak's reversals [...] happened all by them-

47 Ibid., p. 16.

48 Penslar: Israel, p. 10.

49 Uri Cohen points out an echo in *Only Yesterday* to this kind of cultural Zionism, a direct allusion to "Moshe Smilansky's story 'Abu l'Kalb' (Arabic, 'Father of the Dog')," when Isaac Kumer talks to the night guard near his house, "a poor and wretched Arab who has nothing but his dog" (OY 141). The original story revolves around "a black Arab named after his beloved white dog, loved and killed for the whiteness desired by his master but ultimately unattainable." This allusion is important because Moshe Smilansky (1874–1953) – great uncle of the famous modernist writer and politician, S. Yizhar (1916–2006) – was a Zionist leader of the first *aliya*: a strong believer in the cultural Zionism of Ahad Haam. He wrote about Arab life in the Ottoman period, favoured a binational state and wanted peace with the Arabs (this was the cultural Zionism of Kafka and his friends as well).

50 Penslar: Israel, p. 16; my emphasis.

selves, as if his limbs ruled him and he didn't rule them" (OY 315). The concept of "turning" (*teshuva*, repentance, or returning), which is crucial for redemption in Jewish mysticism, is parodied here in typical modernist fashion.

The problem in modernity is that "The evil men in Israel are like dogs" (OY 311). Now dogs are no longer used to announce the excommunication of individuals, but an individual like the fanatical Reb Fayesh hangs up "posters of excommunications, which he was afraid to hang up in daytime lest those who were excommunicated tear down the posters" (OY 324). Reb Fayesh is shrewd, hypocritical, and especially rude to Isaac Kumer because he is not observant enough. When he makes Kumer leave his home, a dog is shouting and "Isaac recalled the dog on whose skin he had written Crazy Dog. He turned to Reb Fayesh's house and said, Crazy Dog should have been written on you and your skin" (OY 309). Reb Fayesh receives an appropriate punishment when he inadvertently chances upon Kumer's alter-ego Balak that night when he is hanging up the excommunication posters. Balak himself is "filled with love and affection for that human creature who is awake like him" (OY 324) and barks a "welcoming bark." This startles Reb Fayesh, and in a surreal fashion the excommunication posters are flying away and the Commandments are "rolling away and striking him in the face" (OY 324). Horrified that the forefathers of the excommunicated are coming to take revenge on him, "for the notes were white as shrouds of the dead" (OY 325), Reb Fayesh screams, runs, and the notes run after him. When he kicks Balak and the dog screams, Reb Fayesh has a stroke. Balak's unintentionally revenge, in view of his final intentional attack on his creator Kumer, adds a further dimension to the creation of Balak, especially because he develops a new voice: not "the voice of wailing" or "whining," or "groaning," "but a new voice, a voice of revenge" and he "sank his mouth in the space of the world, to bite the whole world" (OY 505).

Todd Hasak-Lowy links Balak with another creation story, "the golem legend."⁵¹ The golem was created in Jewish folklore to help the Jews in times of need to combat antisemitism. Initially a saviour figure, he all of a sudden spins out of control and goes mad. The rabbi, though, remains in control, wipes off the aleph, the first letter in "emeth" (Truth), so that the word transforms into "met" (death) and the golem dies. The original legend testifies to the omnipotent power of the sacred word, but modern versions tell a different story. Gustav Meyrink's golem (1915) originated out of a "thought" which then took the form of the golem.⁵² In Agnon, Balak gradually becomes what his inscription says he

51 Hasak-Lowy, Todd: A Mad Dog's Attack on Secularized Hebrew: Rethinking Agnon's Temol Shilshom, in: Prooftexts 24 (2004): p. 167–198, here p. 172.

52 Meyrink, Gustav: Der Golem, Leipzig 1915, p. 57.

is. Meyrink was also fascinated by the psychological gothic and represents the golem as an alter-ego in which individuals see themselves. Paul Wegener's last and most famous silent film *Der Golem* (1920) features a golem who maliciously turns against his creator. Most importantly, Chajim Bloch's *Der Prager Golem. Von seiner "Geburt" bis zu seinem "Tod"* (*The Golem of Prague. From his "Birth" until his "Death"*, 1920), is a pessimistic commentary on World War I (the experience of a whole generation and Bloch's own experience as a soldier in the trenches). Bloch depicts the whole world as "vergolemt" (taken over by a golem), since nations blindly follow orders, kill each other, and self-destruct.⁵³

For Balak, too, his entire world is "vergolemt" since his persecution never ends, for "God created one thing against another" (OY 320). When the British come and Balak hears English for the first time, he comments that "languages were created only so that humans will not understand each other" (OY 316). He knows that one more language makes no difference, for he already "knew seventy tongues like most of the dogs in Jerusalem" (OY 316). Balak's very existence creates a tower of Babel storm after he makes headlines in the newspapers all over Palestine: "When the Jerusalem newspapers reached Jaffa, Jaffa thought that dog was a parable, like Mendele's horse and other stories of livestock and animals and birds which a person reads for pleasure, and if he's intelligent, he applies his intelligence to the moral" (OY 485). But in this case, "they didn't know who they were against" (OY 485). There is no obvious didactic moral lesson in Balak's existential dilemma. He attracts so much attention because he is not just an alter-ego of Kumer but represents them all in their "vergolemt" existence.

In fact, Agnon satirizes the community that loses sight of what is important as they latch onto the Balak story, in their need for sensationalism and distraction, delving into interpretations in all the languages of the world which exist in Palestine. This creates complete havoc, a confusion of languages as in the biblical Tower of Babel story (OY 487). Ironically, when they refocus their attention on the "Big Quarrel" (OY 488) and rekindle the "war for Hebrew" (OY 487) from 1913, all of a sudden they totally forget to torture Balak, who "thought the world had returned to a good state" (OY 487). The modern message is clear: the lack of a unified language figuratively results in the loss of a unified vision, which leads to internal division, struggle, and apathy, followed by mental paralysis and spiritual death. All of these symptoms are increasingly exhibited by Balak, who was created to embody this disease of modernity.

Balak's and Kumer's predicament, then, is a metaphor for an entire "infected" community for whom there is no salvation. All his life Balak keeps searching for the truth, to discover the true meaning of the inscription on his skin (OY 303–

53 Bloch, Chajim: *Der Prager Golem. Von seiner »Geburt« bis zu seinem »Tod«*, Berlin 1920, p. 18.

304, 626). Yet, truth will not reveal itself and remains out of reach for this Job-like golem dog. A meaningless death is near – but not without Agnon granting Balak a final Job-like rebellion against his creator. The vicious circle closes when Balak, now infected with rabies, encounters his creator Isaac Kumer one last time and bites him, infecting him with a “real” disease – for which modern science still has no cure. Kumer, in turn, – another modern Job who is also singled out to suffer for no fault of his own but who, unlike Balak, suffers in silence – eventually becomes a modern Isaac who is not spared but sacrificed (OY 639).

Only Yesterday, so near and yet so far away, refers to a time when truth was not just an empty word and even suffering had meaning. Both Kafka and Agnon were modernists and satirists, who shared this awareness of the loss of tradition. Both writers’ texts complement each other: they are set in the same time period, depict the early stages of immigration to the land of Israel before the establishment of the Jewish State, and use animal metaphors for their social satires. Kafka’s short story, *Jackals and Arabs*, highlights the complex relationships between Western Zionists, Diaspora Jews/jackals in Palestine, and the dominant Arab population, and is revolutionary in its time for the representation of an educated, Western Arab. Here, the jackal metaphor satirizes both the Diaspora Jews as well as Zionist messianism before the Balfour Declaration. Agnon’s *Only Yesterday* is much larger in scope, a major epic novel, and an ambitious modern secular midrash in modern Hebrew which depicts the loss of tradition, the illness of modernity, amidst the struggles and trials of colonization during the second *aliya* through the eyes of the protagonists Isaac Kumer and his alter-ego, Balak, the mad Diaspora dog.