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## “Good to Think With”: The Work of Objects in Three Novels of Modern Jewish Life

EARLY IN DOVID BERGELSON'S *Nokh alemen* (*The End of Everything*, 1913), a modernist Yiddish novel set in a provincial town outside Kiev, Reb Gedalya, the shtetl's aging and increasingly outdated patriarch, encounters his daughter Mirel, his most precious possession: "Reb Gedalye had already returned from the Sadagura study house with his prayer shawl and phylacteries, and with Gitele absent, felt very lonely in the empty house. He found Mirel standing all alone in her room, and once again distractedly began fiddling with the knick-knacks on her dressing table" (86/187).<sup>1</sup> The passage's symmetry, its juxtaposition of religious and profane objects, is ironically tethered to a sense of a physical void: the house *feels* empty and Mirel is "standing all alone in her room." This perceived isolation is bracketed by a pair of object sets: the prayer shawl and phylacteries, on the one hand, and the knick-knacks or "trifles" (*kleynekeiten*) on Mirel's dressing table, on the other. Her father then tells her, in a "distracted" manner, that "the bailiff might call here today," to which Mirel responds by donning "her jacket and black scarf" and leaving the house. The narrative equivalence between the accoutrements of religious observance and the "knick-knacks" of Mirel's vanity seems to render them both equally unreliable as objects of comfort or sustenance: the prayer shawl and phylacteries should be handled with intention and devotion, the opposite of "distracted fiddling" (*arumtapn*), yet neither set of possessions will withstand the demands of the bailiff, who may or may not "call here today." The family is approaching bankruptcy, and, within the provincial backwater that is the shtetl, financial concerns shape traditional religious observance as well as the most mundane possessions. The movement from religious objects to knick-knacks suggests that the former have been stripped of their functional value, while the latter appear to soothe or

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical references to the novel cite the page number of the English translation *The End of Everything* followed by the page number of the Yiddish edition *Nokh alemen*.

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focus, like a fetish. This brief set piece, culminating in Mirel's abrupt departure, may be read as a cameo rendering of the entire narrative, from its granular exhaustion of traditional shtetl life and Reb Gedalya's bankruptcy and death, to the eventual disappearance of Mirel, the novel's centerpiece. Indeed, the work of objects in Bergelson's novel seems linked to Mirel and her growing synonymy with the shtetl itself: both are fated to vanish by the novel's close.

The idea of the shtetl as a withering and diminished object is also implicit in Russian Jewish ethnographic work contemporaneous with *The End of Everything*. S. An-sky's great ethnographic project of 1912–14 was likewise conducted in the surroundings of Kiev, and An-sky and his colleagues were determined to record and preserve material details about the minutia of Jewish daily life that otherwise would be irretrievably lost in a rapidly shifting social and political landscape: "For An-sky, as for many other Russian-Jewish intellectuals of this time, the monumental and decisive changes that transpired in the late imperial period—growth of anti-Semitic ideologies, mass emigration, and the rise of conversion rates—led to the most significant cultural break in modern Jewish history, shattering the foundation of Jewish civilization" (Avrutin et al. 9–10). In addition to photographs, data, and responses to an extensive questionnaire about shtetl life, An-sky collected examples of material culture, including artifacts and *pinkasim* (communal record books). His goals were specifically contextual; he was interested, "above all, in the narratives in which these objects figured" (192). One of the expedition's immediate results was a short-lived exhibit in St. Petersburg in 1914 of more than eight hundred objects and manuscripts, including common objects of everyday life as well as sound recordings and the *pinkasim* (see Dymshits). An-sky's collection was later dispersed to various institutions and archives in Russia and the former Soviet bloc, and much of it was destroyed—a fate that prefigures the later brutal and systematic destruction of Jewish life and lives. Moreover, the story of what ultimately happened to this vast record of shtetl life resembles in remarkable fashion what happens to Mirel at the end of Bergelson's novel: she simply boards a train and disappears.

*The End of Everything* is the first of three novels of modern Jewish life discussed in this essay, all chosen for their exemplary and distinctive attention to material culture and the meaning of things. In these novels a reader encounters a variety of things: objects, in relation to their human subjects, embedded in the physical and material transformations affecting Jewish societies in the early to mid-twentieth century. For Bergelson, the novel's elaborate deployment of personal and familial possessions points towards the demise of the shtetl; the diminished "use-value" of traditional mores and behaviors eventually focuses on the figure of Mirel Hurvitz, the novel's putative heroine, whose own utility or "exchange value" is increasingly attenuated.<sup>2</sup> In Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), the detritus of a Lower East Side childhood become symbolic totems of a violent coming-of-age and budding artistic consciousness; the narrative's evolving treatment of a series of "evocative objects" highlights the charged relation among European, American, and Jewish cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Marx distinguished between the use-value of objects (their utility) and their exchange-value (their worth in terms of other objects, or their fetishized, imagined form as commodities). For a lucid reading of the fetish in both Marx and Freud, see Dant.

forms. Finally, in S.Y. Agnon's *Just Yesterday* (Hebrew, 1946), an epic historical novel of immigration and cultural renaissance set in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the novel's interlocking motifs related to the crafts of taxidermy and olive-wood production underline a concern for art's significance in relation to the pragmatic work of nation-building. These novels depict three different fictional landscapes in which the interaction between people and their stuff provides a sensitive measure of diverse material changes in mid-century Jewish cultures (cf. Miller 4).

Drawing on Marx's model of commodification, the symbolic value of the fetish from Freud and Lévi-Strauss, postcolonial theories of the nation, and Bruno Latour's influential concept of the "hybrid," this essay analyzes the specific materiality arising from the novel's generic performance. I understand genre here not as a static taxonomy of conventions, but as a dynamic performance, whose evolving form is embedded in, and shaped by, the historical circumstances of its production (see Derrida, "Law of Genre"; Frow; Dimmock). The novel, perhaps more than any other genre, gives us a sense of what Bill Brown describes as "the way cultural codes become objectified in specific material forms, the way people shape, code, and recode the material object world, the way they make things meaningful and valuable" ("Secret Life of Things" 2). My material reading of the modernist novel by Jewish authors is indebted to Brown's work on the meaning of objects in American literature, an account of Gilded Age fiction that also resembles a "prehistory of the modernist fascination with things" (14). By focusing on the treatment of objects in a series of canonical novels from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Brown explores how "different literary registers—naturalism, regionalism, and realism . . . dramatize the role of objects in American lives, and . . . the role of humans in the life of American objects" (*Sense of Things* 14). Specifically, his analysis tracks the transformation of objects into "things" and their meaning for the people who make, handle, and possess them. Material culture, such as drawing room furniture or the extensive collection that is the putative subject of Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*, is the stage upon which plays a particularly American anxiety about class and social status in the first true age of consumer capitalism. That this fictional drama unfolds in both European urban centers as well as in rural New England only underscores the degree to which "things," emblems of identity and desire, help American culture come to terms with its own status as both cosmopolitan and local. I am interested in how similar anxieties might be at play in novels by Jewish authors in the first half of the twentieth century, with their transnational reach and native allegiances, and tracing as they do the major trajectories of early twentieth-century migration.

Moreover, as a genre, the novel's long *durée*, as well as its thick interweaving of psychological interiority with nuanced depictions of setting and landscape, provides an ideal medium in which to examine the meaning of objects and their production. Brown's work reminds us that the meaning of material possessions in fictional texts remains embedded in the particular social and economic milieu in which the text is produced. Specifically, the three novels discussed in this essay are all set in environments of tremendous material change, including migration as well as economic and political upheaval. Within these narrative worlds, objects—like Claude Lévi-Strauss's animals—become "good to think" (*bonne à penser*) by

providing a vivid sense of how materiality matters for midcentury Jewish cultural forms.

Novels also are indebted to the material form of the book (Benjamin 87). We encounter the novel as a thing precisely because of its immersive quality: “the book’s minute description of the material world is a device which tends to draw attention to the book as object” (Stewart 29). This essay explores this complementary set of conditions—objects in books, and the book as object—with an eye to the diverse social and material conditions within which these novels of modern Jewish life are produced and consumed. Broadly speaking, I argue that the novel’s engagement with things, and its emergence as a thing, points to the arena in which writing competes with objects, fearing, while also taking pleasure in, its own commodification and immersion in the economic domain. For Marx, a commodity is defined by its exchange value, its worth in the marketplace in terms of other commodities; furthermore, exchange value supersedes use-value (utility) precisely through an act of abstraction that (for Marx) involves the erasure of human labor and for readers (fortunately) demands an imaginative act. In Marx’s famous example, the transition from wood to table is even less remarkable than what happens after the table enters the marketplace:

It is as clear as noonday, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas. (“Fetishism of Commodities”)

For the artist, commodification is two-faced: it potentially cheapens the artistic product but also makes art available to a wider audience, thus increasing one measure of its value; commodification, for our novelists, is thus both threatening and desirable. Modern Jewish writing had in addition, a special “use-value” problem given its indebtedness to traditional Jewish forms and the preeminent theological, ethical role of those classical Judaic texts; Hebrew and Yiddish modernist poets resisted this ethical impulse through an adherence to the symbolist rallying cry of “art for art’s sake.” The novel continues this iconoclastic engagement with tradition through its treatment of both material objects and a sense of self as a commodity within an economy of things.

Literature’s entry into the marketplace—both “transcendent” and “grotesque”—occurs during what Benjamin famously termed “the age of mechanical reproduction” and so the potential diminishment of art’s authority. Modern Jewish writing’s relation to tradition compounds this anxiety: indeed, according to Benjamin, “the uniqueness of the work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (223). For Benjamin, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art . . . the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” (221). However, this “withering” of aura, while an inevitable consequence of technological advancement, is not to be mourned; that is, as “the criterion of authenticity” ceases to be the yardstick against which art is measured, the very function of art becomes radicalized, moving out of the domain of tradition and ritual and into another practice

entirely: “politics” (224). The work of objects in these novels becomes, I argue, a marker of the changing role of Jewish literary production in the twentieth century.

### **The Shtetl as Disappearing Object in *The End of Everything***

Early twentieth-century Yiddish fiction had an uneasy relationship with realism (see Miron); indeed, it often described an unstable sociological setting that seemed to be disappearing under the very pen describing it. As early as 1911, the Russian Jewish critic David Frishman issued the following claim about the work of S. Y. Abramovitch (Mendele the Book Seller, 1835–1917), a foundational figure for both Hebrew and Yiddish fiction:

Let us assume, a deluge comes, inundating and washing away from the face of the earth the Jewish ghetto and the Jewish life which it contains, not leaving behind so much as a residue, a sign, except by sheer chance, Mendele’s four major works. . . . With these spared, the future scholar would be able to reconstruct the entire map of Jewish shtetl life in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century in such a manner that not even one iota would be left out. (qtd. in Miron 6)

The veracity of Fishman’s claim is, of course, beside the point. More relevant is the anticipation of the flood, the ever-present premonition of destruction, and the belief in the text as a kind of material substitute. This trope in modern Yiddish fiction—the notion of the text as a material marker, a kind of map for the shtetl—is aptly summarized by David Roskies: “the smallness and self-containment of the shtetl, that which made it such a perfect vehicle for the exploration of the Diaspora Jews acting as a collective, alerted the novelists early on to its essential vulnerability, and they, in turn, became the first to chart the ultimate disaster” (122). While Yiddish literature may have had its own internal, ideologically driven argument about its mimetic properties, the meaning of material detail became especially fraught in an era of change and uncertainty.

Bergelson’s novel, like other Yiddish fiction of the first two decades of the twentieth century, is deeply shaped by the political, economic, and social upheavals of the time. Mikhail Krutikov underlines the particular importance of a sequence of events—the pogroms in Kishinev and elsewhere in 1903, the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05, and the failed revolution in 1905, among them—that were crucial to an emergent cohort of young Yiddish writers whose literary sensibilities were sharpened against the background of violent change. Within this setting, Bergelson was seen as a “‘poet of decline’ of the wealthy merchant class of the Ukrainian shtetl, which was forced to abandon its leading position in Jewish society under the pressure of advancing capitalist urbanization” (Krutikov 38). The shtetl itself had ceased to function as an autonomous entity and would eventually become “a part of the city-centered system” (Krutikov 47; see also Sherman). His early short fiction is studded with scenes depicting the broken relationship between province and urban center, together with the gradual dissolution of social ties predicated on the old economic order, disrupted by financial ruin and spiritual bankruptcy.

The novel renders the economic domain’s pervasiveness in several ways: the repeated description of personal possessions and their value; the narrative treatment of Mirel as an object of exchange; and depictions of different kinds of labor in relation to the work of literature. The novel deploys the term *sokhrish* (commercial or related to business) to describe a whole range of objects and behaviors, such

as *der shtum-sokhrisher shmeykhl* (silent business smile), *sokhrishe koyles* (businesslike voices), and *sokhrishe moykhes* (commercial brains).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Mirel's engagement to Velvl Burnes seems to be "irrevocably over" (19) only after the financial agreements have finally collapsed and the promissory notes left as a dowry are no longer worth their full value; "Velvl understood . . . that the three thousand rubles belonging to the man who should've been his father-in-law were lost for good" (18–19). (The loss of Mirel's dowry also precipitates the family's eventual bankruptcy.) This sense of Mirel as property is complemented and amplified by the novel's wide array of socially and economically marked objects.

*The End of Everything* is replete with domestic interiors, foremost of which is the Hurvitz homestead, the increasingly gloomy and dilapidated home where Mirel grew up. The household furnishings seem to possess a lively agency and desire otherwise lacking in the Hurvitz home: "Rose-colored curtains hung at the windows, velvet runners lay on the floors, all yearning for an absent joy . . . deeply envious of some other runner lying somewhere in some other house" (138). Mirel's home is contrasted with both the modern "furnished cottage" belonging to her ex-fiancé Velvl Burnes, filled with the accoutrements of the striving nouveau riche, as well as the snug cottage on the outskirts of the village where the midwife Schatz dwells in relative independence. The cottage offers Mirel occasional respite, and it is within this relatively liberal space that Mirel first encounters the middling Hebrew poet Herz, who will capture her intermittent romantic attention until the novel's depressing conclusion. Within these houses, as well as the quiet, newly furnished wing of her "in-law's house" at the edge of the Kiev suburb, into which Mirel moves in the novel's long second half, the reader encounters a variety of objects and possessions: some antique or handmade and resonant with individual meaning or significance; others machine-made, brought from outside the shtetl and indicative of modernity with its particular economy of labor, capital, and production (see Mantovan). The novel encourages readers to note the difference between antiques and religious ritual objects and books, on the one hand, and the more "new-fangled" items such as Reb Gedalye's "nickel vaporizer he'd brought back from abroad" (93), on the other. Within all these domestic settings, and amidst all their material furnishings, Mirel, like the heroine of *The Spoils of Poynton*, "was the great piece in the gallery" (81).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, one should ask, which kind of an object is Mirel?

She is, of course, Reb Gedalye's most valuable possession, a precious commodity to be bid for and exchanged, the thing that may ensure his financial future, and with it the shtetl's viability as a social entity. The reliance on Marxist vocabulary here should not be read as an effort retroactively to identity Bergelson's communism, despite the author's later, and ultimately fatal, entanglement in Soviet politics. It simply highlights how an object's commodification, the determination of its value in terms of other products, effaces the human labor that created it. Bergelson's novel does offer some comment on commodification's erasure of manual labor,

<sup>3</sup> This observation and examples are from the Soviet critic Yekhezkl Dobroshin in 1947, cited in Krutikov 44.

<sup>4</sup> The comment occurs as it is revealed that Mrs. Gereth has taken "the very best pieces" of her art collection from the family home, which her son is about to inherit with his new wife (whom Mrs. Gereth disapproves of), leaving "the rubbish" behind.

especially as Mirel interacts and responds to different kinds of work (see below). However, the crucial difference between use-value and exchange value, for the purposes of my analysis, concerns the role of the imagination and the power of symbolic meaning. In the novel, Mirel is depicted as a mysterious beauty of middling intelligence and refinement, whose family had once been respected for the father's wisdom and religious piety. And yet, despite these relatively mediocre qualities, her value skyrockets—for a while at least—because of how she is *imagined* by her peers and various lovers, and she is pursued by a series of agents as a desired object of matchmaking.

Mirel's commodification is encapsulated in a set of scenes before and during a party held by the wealthy sugar refinery owner Nokhem Taraby, in which Mirel realizes what the reader has begun to suspect: "an awareness of her own fall from grace" (77). Before the party, Mirel stands on the verandah of her home as a sleigh carrying the Taraby children and their guests, students who have heard of her affair the previous summer with Nosn Heller, passes by, exposing her to their "lustfully voracious" and "lecherous, grinning" faces:

For some reason, his [the student's] lascivious glance aroused in her an unspoken, lustful excitement that intermixed with prurient thoughts with deep inner dejection. The lustful arousal disappeared with the departing sleigh, but the dejection remained, grew stronger, and yielded to an innermost sense of emptiness and regret. All at once she appeared small and demeaned in her own eyes. (66/166)

This amazing sequence moves quickly from Mirel's arousal at being the focus of attention to an "innermost" objectification: the realization of how "small" she has become. On the very next page, another passage further increases the sense of Mirel's "devaluation": wrapped for warmth in her father's "rickety sleigh drawn by his emaciated horses," Mirel notices in the distance "the two expensive sleighs of those who were once to have been her in-laws, filling the silence of the fields with the jingle of their bells" (67–68). When the two sleighs eventually catch up to her own and are on each side of her, Velvl and his sisters shout "calmly and busily across her, as though across an inanimate object . . . and swiftly left her behind" (68/168). Mirel's fall from being the "greatest piece in the gallery" to a "lifeless thing" (*lebenloser zach*) thus prefigures the eventual demise of her family, and with it the shtetl's viability as a social entity.

As the novel progresses, Mirel's fate as a "lifeless thing" is amplified by her reluctant acquiescence to marriage. In the following passage, painters prepare the in-laws' house for the holiday, and Mirel is treated like a piece of furniture:

One of the painters has occasion to pass through the adjoining room to collect some necessary piece of equipment and noticed something. Returning to his work fairly excited, he looked round carefully to make sure no one but his companion was there, and asked him with a suggestive wink:

—The mistress of the house isn't bad-looking, eh? . . .

In the disarranged room next door, Mirel went on lying on the sofa in her wide, low-cut dressing gown with its bell-shaped sleeves. . . .

All around her stood the beds, both wardrobes with their mirrored doors and the armchairs from the salon together with the huge wash-tub from which the sodden floor-rag hadn't been removed for days on end. (172–73/279)

Her mother-in-law enters later and orders the furniture moved so the floors can be polished and the walls cleaned: "While all this was going on, Mirel never stirred from her place on the sofa" (178).

Another kind of language describing Mirel's diminished exchange value suggests a broader critique of Jewish society and the role of literature/culture within it. Mirel's "utility" is broached again and again in the novel (114/216), as if she were some sort of old-fashioned instrument. She is, in Herz's words, a "provincial tragedy" (118) and "nothing more than a transitional point (*ibergang-punkt*) in human development" (135/238). The first reference locates her fate in the geographic margins neglected by modern commerce. The latter term reduces her to a point of reference whose meaning resides solely in relation to a now-irrelevant past and a yet-to-be determined future. That this critique is offered by Herz, whose own precarious utility seems well represented in his short story "The Dead Town" (included in the novel in its entirety), suggests an anxiety regarding literature's place in the new economic landscape. Mirel's other occasional love-interest, Nosn Heller, is also a literary failure; his attempts to publish a penny-daily repeatedly flounder.

In contrast to these abortive cultural endeavors and Mirel's passivity, the novel presents a stream of manual laborers whose industriousness is a rebuke to Mirel's (and her lovers') futility. A team of tailors and seamstresses descend with their shears and sewing machines to fit her for her wedding dress:

And Mirel, it appeared, was fully aware that she'd recently come down a great deal in the world; was aware of it when she stood all afternoon in the stillness of a room bestrewn with linen; was aware of it when she gathered all this linen together and bent down to pack it into the open trousseau chest. All around her the wedding preparations went steadily forward, and from time to time through the stillness in the cool rooms could be heard the grating rasp of the large tailoring scissors. As he sat bowed over his sewing machine rapidly pumping its treadle with his foot, one of the young tailors' assistants attempted to break this silence. Wholly unexpectedly, he suddenly burst into full-throated song: "O my beloved! / On a distant road / I take my way."

Later the solitary rattle of the rapidly stitching machine was all that could be heard—heard at length, hoarsely and angrily, until it was finally silenced. (131–32/234–35)

The three-line ditty can be understood as a compressed rendering of Mirel's life and demise. The sounds echo in the following scene, where a young seamstress who prepares one of Mirel's silk dresses "repeatedly picked up the hot pressing iron, sprayed the garment with water from her mouth, and heard one sewing machine pick up the rhythm of stitching from another indoors. Far, far away, near the town bridge to the east, the regular beats of the blacksmith's hammer died slowly away one after the other, and the shtetl fell silent" (133/236).

More sophisticated machines will eventually replace the tailor's feet, the seamstress's spit, and the strong arms of the blacksmith; the carefully wrought objects of what James calls "the more labouring ages"—"the upholsterer's and joiner's and brazier's work, the chairs and tables, the cabinets and presses, the material odds and ends" (*Spoils of Poynton* 26)—will become desirable antiques. Indeed, in an era of technological change, antiques demonstrate both status and nostalgia for an ostensibly simpler time. In *The End of Everything* the shtetl itself, a fetishized literary object, is the antique, a remnant of the laboring ages. The novel's main characters are alienated from that older way of life, viewing it from "the outskirts of the shtetl" almost like a tableau:

[Herz] looked attentively at those Jews who'd just returned from the bathhouse and were standing about here and there next to their widely opened front doors preparing to welcome the Sabbath in the synagogue. . . . Noticing Mirel, he took several steps toward her and directed her attention to the shtetl:

—She ought to look closely. This was truly a Sabbath sky; there on the western mountain even the green fields all around looked as though they were welcoming the Sabbath.

Glancing mechanically in that direction, Mirel saw nothing but a weary peasant still plowing his fields as twilight drew on. A great band of plowed earth stretched across the entire face of the verdant mountain, encircling it as though with a broad black belt. (139/242)

If Herz and Mirel stand apart from the shtetl—the former because of his itinerant career as an admired but minor poet and the latter through her resistance to the conventions of marriage—they are both far too passive to be considered defiant; rather, their interaction here provides one of the novel's clearest articulations of the gap between the shtetl and its dissatisfied, unsettled youth. Herz, although disaffected with religious orthodoxy, seems genuinely moved and takes a noble, if somewhat ironic, stab at spiritual uplift. While he may not abide by the preparatory rituals for the Sabbath, he appreciates their aesthetic value. Yet none of this seems to help his work very much: any novel that ends with its writer-protagonist suffering from having his tonsils removed and unable to speak leaves a sense of writing as maimed and voiceless. Mirel, by contrast, ever her father's daughter and attuned to finances, understands how impoverished, even naïve, this romanticized version of Jewish life is (see Kruticov 197): in her perfunctory, "mechanical" glance, the anticipatory green fields are plowed under by the peasant's drudgery.

Ultimately, Mirel's utility and the viability of the shtetl are one in the same. Unlike Emma Bovary (a possible inspiration for her character) or even Lily Bart, her contemporary from Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1906), whose respective milieus simply carry on without them, Mirel's demise signals the end of an era. Mirel's final disappearing act may seem to point to her agency, but, if so, it is an agency whose pragmatic parameters have become increasingly narrow and narrower as the plot progresses. Having determined that married life is not for her, and aborting a child whose paternity is in doubt, Mirel takes the eighteen-hour train journey back to shtetl she had left when she became a married woman, only to find herself moving from location to location (the rabbi's house to the inn by the railway station), caught between waiting at the home of a family friend and visiting the post office for letters that never arrive.

Bergelson's novel is not unique in its treatment of the shtetl, or Jewish community, as a feminized object. Within Yiddish fiction, the *agunah* (a woman abandoned by her husband, who may not, according to Jewish law, remarry) connects the demise of shtetl life to other catastrophes in Jewish history (Miron), as well as to modernity's impact on the family unit. Indeed, the figure of the city as an abandoned or wayward woman has a long tradition in Hebrew writing, going back to the biblical book of Lamentations, where Jerusalem (Zion) is mourned in precisely those terms. Mirel suffers some of the social stigma of the *agunah*, although it is she, technically, who is the agent of her own desolation, when she leaves "on the train that traveled to the border" in the novel's closing pages.

### **Bricolage and Evocative Objects in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep***

To move from *The End of Everything* to Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) involves encountering a radically different set of spaces. Although David Shearl's parents (Genia and Albert), Eastern European Jewish immigrants in early twentieth-century New York, may come from the pastoral environments described in Bergelson's novel, *Call It Sleep* is largely set in the gritty, teeming streets of Brooklyn and

Lower Manhattan. The two novels are both emblems of modernist style, with an elliptic, fragmented, and often opaque narrative. They also share a partially omniscient point of view, with the motives and desires of the main characters driving the plot while remaining largely hidden to the reader. If, for Bergelson, the material world is funneled through the vehicle of Mirel as a commodity and disappearing object, the objects of *Call It Sleep* endure as stubborn reminders of what was, as well as complex symbolic artifacts marking a yet unconstituted future. Indeed, the relatively spare apartment of the new American family is almost a rebuke to the richly decorated, labyrinthine domestic quarters in Bergelson's novel. *Call It Sleep* thus capitalizes on a quality referenced by another American writer, Willa Cather, in her landmark essay "The Novel D meuble" (1922), in which she accuses the contemporary novel of being "over-furnished." In her critique of "mere versimilitude," Cather argues that domestic objects should be fused with feeling and exist within the novel's material world as central to the characters' "emotional penumbra" (6), lending a kind of visible depth to the text in which they operate. Cather's evaluation reaches for something beyond symbolism—not just things, and not ideas in or about things, but rather the emotional residue between people and their stuff.

Scholars have noted that David's young life resembles that of the author, and the novel may be read as the depiction of an aesthetic education in relation to family, religion, and nation, in the spirit of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Certainly the novel's dense polyphonic weave of different languages, voices, and registers, out of which David emerges as a kind of maestro, supports this view (see Wirth Neshner). Indeed, from a young age, David successfully navigates the novel's relatively strict demarcation of language and space. He speaks Yiddish at home and English in the street. Roth renders Yiddish, especially the Yiddish of David's parents, as a richly allusive, ornate, stylized speech, full of detail and nuance. However, their English, as well as David's, sounds like the flawed, accented, partial, or broken street English of a new immigrant. Hebrew is the language of Jewish learning, and Polish is for secrets between Genia and her newly arrived sister. David works through the linguistic contours of his world to create a sense of self and fashion a set of explanations about his parents' past that is also his own story. His reflections are triggered by a specific set of objects associated with his parents' lives in Europe (the cornfield painting and the ox horns) as well as important talismans from their shared lives in New York (the whip, the rosary). These objects enable David's gradual mastery of language as a malleable, even dangerous, material element. The practice in both instances—in relation to both physical objects and the treatment of language as material—is a form of *bricolage*. In this section, I describe the novel's distinctive reliance on objects, drawing on both Freud's idea of the fetish as an object representing an absence or something that cannot be said,<sup>5</sup> and Claude L vi-Strauss's explication of the practice of *bricolage*. If in Bergelson's novel Mirel's emergence as a commodified object highlights both the shtetl's demise and an anxiety over writing's entry into the economic sphere, *Call It Sleep* engages with materiality through young David's relation to the object world he

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<sup>5</sup> Specifically, for Freud, in relation to the mother's sexuality and the boy's belief regarding her genitalia, in "Fetishism" (1927) (*Complete Works* 147–57).

inhabits. Both Freud and Lévi-Strauss provide fruitful models for understanding this complex relation, particularly as an indicator of David's aesthetic awakening.

*Bricolage* is a creative form of composition and assembly. In Lévi-Strauss's terms, the activity of the *bricoleur* is distinct from, and even oppositional to, that of the engineer: the domain of the former is the science of the concrete, the latter, that of the abstract (17–18).<sup>6</sup> *Bricolage's* relatively limited repertoire—like the stable, “constitutive units of myth”—ironically encourages creativity:

Consider [the *bricoleur*] at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it. . . . He interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could “signify.” (18–19)

Lévi-Strauss's observations describe many forms of childhood play where a closed set of objects is tinkered with to create new combinations, and David's tendency to assemble his world through certain objects is certainly evident early on in *Call It Sleep*. As a young boy, he turns to his box of “trinkets” when left alone with Luter, a friend of his father's whom he doesn't trust:

Hurt, David had turned away and gotten out his box in the pantry in which he saved both the calendar leaves he collected and whatever striking odds and ends he found in the street. His mother called them his gems and often asked him why he liked things that were worn and old. It would have been hard to tell her. But there was something about the way in which the link of a chain was worn or the thread on a bolt or a castor-wheel that gave him a vague feeling of pain when he ran his fingers over them. They were like worn shoe-soles or very thin dimes. You never saw them wear, you only knew that they were worn, obscurely aching. (35)

David's treasures consist of pages marking the passage of time, as well as industrial detritus; their visible, tangible evidence of being “worn and old” comforts David in vulnerable moments. The self-soothing motion of running his fingers along their surfaces, themselves worked over through use and handling, seems expressly directed toward the absence of his mother, in whom Luter has displayed a prurient and confusing (to David) interest. Arguably, David turns to his box of stuff in Luter's presence to find an objective correlative for his own “obscure aching” and thereby potentially reanimate the presence of his mother, who is with his father on a rare evening out. David's engagement with these objects is notably different from Reb Gedalya's distracted “fiddling” with the things on Mirel's vanity—ultimately a meaningless, idle act that brings neither him nor Mirel any real comfort. David's relation to the world of objects, by contrast, is productive, tactile, and autoerotic; like the *bricoleur*, he relies on an “already existent set made up of tools and materials” and plays with “whatever is at hand” (Lévi-Strauss 17–18). In an earlier sequence, the handling of a small cog from an alarm clock mesmerizes David—“engrossed in the rhythmic, accurate teeth of the yellow cog in his hand”—until he yields to a transcendent vision that prefigures his budding aesthetic development: “His body relaxed. . . . Within him a voice spoke with no words but with the shift of slow flame” (22–23).

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida's reading of Lévi-Strauss cautions that *all* discourse is in fact intertextual *bricolage*, and that the engineer's intellectual prowess and “originality” is a myth (*Writing and Difference* 278–94). For my reading of Roth's novel, and specifically the discursive universe in which David, the new immigrant, comes of age, the D.I.Y. method of the hands-on tinkerer, who encounters linguistic difference with verve and ingenuity, focuses attention on physical artifacts.

In these early scenes, he intuitively draws on the resonant and productive profundity latent in what Sherry Turkle calls “evocative objects”—“companions” to our intellectual and emotional lives (9). David’s development is littered with depictions of such evocative objects and his meditative grip on them: pennies received from a neighbor for lighting her *shabbes*-oven; the apple and cake at the police-station after getting lost; the rabbi’s sharpened wood pointers in *cheder* (religious afterschool); the zinc and wire “sword” forced on him by some local toughs; and the skate key belonging to his new friend Leo. David’s relation to these objects infuses them with emotion and symbolic power: they are tokens of the unfamiliar, the American, the roughness of the street. Some represent access to Jewish textual study that is itself fraught with both random punishment and transcendent beauty. Ultimately, these items point towards David’s emergence as an artist and a sexual being, separate from both his mother’s suffocating tenderness and his father’s abusive anger and brutal violence. His brief friendship with Leo, whom David meets one afternoon on the roof of his building, sets in motion the novel’s concluding series of dramatic events. While Leo’s confidence runs rings around David’s juvenile adulation, the older boy’s magnetism is also depicted in relation to stuff: home alone with David and snacking on forbidden non-Kosher crab legs in his kitchen, Leo “climbed up on the pantry ledge” and retrieved his own box of “trinkets, rings, lockets, cameos”:

Leo fumbled among them. . . . He pulled out a broken string of two-sized black beads near one end of which a tiny cross dangled with a gold figure raised upon it like the one on the wall. “Dat’s de busted rosary me ol’ lady foun,’ dere’s on’y a coupla beads missin.’ I’ll give it tuh yuh. Come on it’s real holy.”

David stared at it fascinated. “C’n I touch id?”

“Sure yuh c’n, go on.” (327)

David notices the dusty box’s sliding cover with the word God “printed in bold, black letters.” Amongst the jewelry and other knick-knacks, the rosary is both decorative ornament and ritual object. The scene is deftly tied to David’s “gems” through the casual mention of the mother; Leo’s fumbling here will be exchanged in later scenes for physical dexterity, even deception, as he tricks David into arranging a compromising rendezvous with Esther, David’s older cousin. Both scenes trade on the comforting ability of the evocative object to displace or repress anxiety provoked by the idea of his mother Genya and cousin Esther as sexual beings. The passage also contains the novel’s typically vivid rendering of the colloquial speech of the young, ethnically tagged New Yorkers. David’s request to touch “id” may be read as a Freudian pun: in order for his own creative, erotic side to truly blossom, David will need to get close to his “slow flame” and allow it to burn higher and brighter, as it does in the novel’s apocalyptic closing section, when David is electrocuted by the streetcar’s third rail.

The soothing function of David’s box of stuff, as well as the revelatory encounter with Leo’s rosary, are undermined by David’s experience of two special items belonging to his parents, objects that recall troubled, unresolved aspects of their past. Both Genya and Albert are tight-lipped about their lives “back home,” and David tries to glean what he can from his mother’s long conversations in Polish with her sister and his father’s rare comments. Two newly acquired items, purchased simply for “decorative” purposes, stir up memories of the past, and both objects become a source of fascination and fixation for David. First, his mother brings home a small painting: “It was a picture of a small patch of ground full of

tall green stalks, at the foot of which, tiny blue flowers grew" (172). The painting reminds Genya of the cornfields of her childhood landscape—"David had hardly ever seen his mother so animated"—and is later connected by the paranoid Albert to Genya's supposed infidelity. As if in response to the painting's idyllic pastoral scene, Albert, who has recently found steady employment as a milkman, brings home a new whip and a mounted set of bull horns. David discovers these items as he enters the apartment: "on the wash-tub lay a bulky package, the strings cut, but the heavy brown paper still covering it; and beside it, crossing each other, a new white-handled whip and the butt of the old broken black one" (297). David had witnessed his father break the old whip while beating a milk thief, an episode seared in his memory and during which Albert also threatened his son. The new whip is clearly a reminder of his father's explosive violence, while the second item signals something else, a message just as ominous but more opaque:

Before him on a shield-shaped wooden plaque, two magnificent horns curved out and up, pale yellow to the ebony tips. So wide was the span between them, he could almost have stretched his arms out on either side, before he could *touch* them. Though they lay there inertly, their bases solidly fashioned to the dark wood, there pulsed from them still a suggestion of terrific power, a power that even while they lay motionless made the breast ache as though they were ever imminent, ever charging. (298; emphasis added)

The plaque is a reminder of Albert's work with cattle as a young man; it is also linked to the death of his father, who was trampled by a bull while working with Albert. Juxtaposed with the delicate, "tiny" blue flowers of his mother's painting, the massive horns, which David cannot even touch, point toward an unattainable strength and masculinity belonging exclusively to his father.

David's evocative objects and his parents' emotional baggage, symbolized through the commodified aesthetic objects of the painting and plaque, collide in a climactic scene toward the novel's conclusion. Having been confronted by Albert regarding David's true paternity, Genya tries to shield her son from his father's wrath. During the parents' escalating quarrel, David retrieves the broken whip from the kitchen and presents it to his father: "'This?' The lids dropped over his father's consuming eyes. 'Why do you—? Why is this given? You know what happened to this? Is it your fate you're begging for?'" (400). Before he can be stopped, Albert attacks his son, and the rosary beads fall from David's pocket: "There, stretched from the green square to the white square of the checkered linoleum lay the black beads—the gold cross framed in the glimmering, wan glaze. Horror magnified the figure on it" (402).

Within the context of the novel's discursive treatment of religious tropes, David's admission of guilt and offer to sacrifice himself seems to combine the compassion of the rosary with the wrath of Old Testament Judaism. Cast into the street by his mother in an effort to save him from Albert's rage, traumatized and badly beaten, David escapes into the neighborhood. He is determined to overcome his fear and face the transformative power within the streetcar tracks.<sup>7</sup> The weapon of

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<sup>7</sup> The scene's melodramatic staging recalls the surreal confrontation between George and his father in Franz Kafka's "The Judgment." David's evolving search for meaning and solace likewise recalls a key passage in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*: "The soul . . . has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets."

choice emerges associatively from his racing mind: “Here I am Mama! By cans I’m hiding. . . . Store-spoon, milk-spoon. . . . Even if it ain’t a sword, could go in the crack. Where it splashes, hold cup like where you held sword” (406–7). The dipper combines this mother’s love (milk) with his father’s wrath (his workplace): “David picked up the dipper, crept out the store entrance, and with the scoop of the dipper under his armpit, long, flat handle in his hand, he slunk quietly toward Tenth Street” (408). The text’s erotic images (“the wavering point” . . . “of the dipper’s handle found the long;” . . . “dark, grinning lips” [413]) coexist with a sense of the dipper as a pen, caught in David’s “frozen fingers.” He eventually succeeds in slipping the dipper into the streetcar tracks, igniting the third rail, and the long poetic passages that synthesize the voices of the street—the “multitudes”—mark his own debut as an artist:

Power! Power like a paw, titanic power,  
ripped through the earth and slammed  
against his body and shackled him  
where he stood. Power! Incredible,  
barbaric power! A blast, a siren of light  
within him, rending, quaking, fusing his  
brain and blood to a fountain of flame. (419)

Ostensibly moving beyond the fetishized objects of his childhood, the work of *bricolage* in the following passages is rendered as a hands-on engagement with the full-throated voices of the street: the profane argot, colloquial jargon, and accented English of commerce and neighborhood. While the novel had earlier deployed a more direct intertextuality to underline David’s exposure to traditional Judaic sources, here the pastiche of casual conversation (about card-playing and family life) and particular cultural reference (to the Statue of Liberty, the New Testament) are funneled through David’s gradual regaining of consciousness. *Bricolage* thus approaches a kind of acculturation: David absorbs the dense particulars of his cultural environment and rearranges them to satisfy, if only temporarily, his own existential need to belong, to feel whole and rooted. After being resuscitated and brought home by a policeman, David sees his father: “For the briefest moment David felt a shrill, wild surge of triumph *whip* within in” (emphasis added). David’s acknowledgement of his brief challenge to the whip’s authority is embedded in an awareness of the power of language as that set of materials “at hand”—as a material substance, at once malleable and persistent, equally shaped by the concrete circumstantial conditions of its production and those actor-agents who employ it.<sup>8</sup>

In the novel’s concluding paragraphs, David feels he has “the power to cull again and reassemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear, the bells, the thick breathing, the roar of crowds and all sounds” (441). He recognizes the potentially regenerative property inherent in the creative process—the culling and reassembling. Roth’s project, then, represents a near note-perfect iteration of the modernist writer’s coming-of-age in the metropole, an artistic working through of the cultural materials at hand. Writing about the influence of modernism on transnational, postcolonial poetic forms, Jahan Ramazani’s observation regarding Anglo-

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<sup>8</sup> This sense of language as a material substance resembles the interwar work of Hebrew and Yiddish modernists, whose syntactically dense “imagist” poems mimicked the physical form of sculpture. See Mann, “Picturing Anna Margolin” and “Visions of Jewish Modernism.”

American modernism rings true here: “the modernists—many of them exiles and émigrés themselves—were the first English-language poets to create a formal vocabulary for the intercultural collisions and juxtapositions, the epistemic instabilities and decenterings, of globalization” (99). This “modernist bricolage” consists of a heteroglossic engagement with an array of cultural sources. Roth’s David, as a figure for the author himself, is a direct descendent of the early Objectivist poetry of Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky and anticipates the postwar Hebrew-Yiddish work of New York poet Gabriel Preil. To the degree that language remains an important theme for contemporary American Jewish authors such as Michael Chabon and Nicole Kraus, Roth’s David—with his evocative objects and tactile relation to the materials at hand—remains an exemplary and foundational figure.

### **Between Olive-Wood and Taxidermy in S. Y. Agnon’s *Just Yesterday***

With S. Y. Agnon’s novel *Just Yesterday* (Hebrew, 1945), perhaps best known for the canine hero who narrates much of its second half, we pivot to yet another geographic setting: Palestine of the early twentieth century. Although all three novels comment on the emergence of modernist Jewish culture, perhaps nowhere is the role of the artist/writer more central than in Agnon’s novel. Renowned for his deft weaving of modernist irony with traditional Judaic sources and motifs, Agnon engages a broad range of the epistemological questions and material conditions shaping modern Jewish life. As Yonathan Sagiv has shown, the discussion of economics is inseparable from other core elements of Agnon’s work, including his incisive depiction of the cultural and social fissures of early twentieth-century Jewish experience: “Agnon’s writing demonstrates that while discourses such as religion, language, or psychoanalysis seem separate from the operations of the monetary economy, these discourses at the same time cannot escape being caught up in an economy of their own, subjected to rules of exchange, calculation, profit, and loss” (12). Indeed, of the works discussed in this essay, *Just Yesterday* contains the most extended meditation on art’s role in modernity’s new economic order. The novel’s discursive treatment of materiality differs from that of *The End of Everything* and *Call It Sleep*, both of which depend on an imaginative act of abstraction—the gap between object and narrative, between thing and meaning. The earlier novels pay careful attention to material objects’ relation to temporality and loss, as well as their tendentious capacity to constitute physical markers of presence: the disappearing shtetl, the lost secrets of Genya’s and Albert’s pasts, or the emergent force of David’s aesthetic awakening. A different sort of material meditation shapes the heart of *Just Yesterday*.

In *Just Yesterday*, the question of raw material itself—and what can be made of it—constitutes an essential narrative thread. Yitzhak Kummer, the novel’s young Galician protagonist, travels to Palestine and finds employment in Jerusalem as a housepainter. His training and practice are embedded in the depiction of other kinds of thing-making and the material conditions shaping their production, circulation, and consumption. Yitzhak meets artisans from the Bezalel Academy who make olive-wood products sold as “Holy Land” souvenirs and a taxidermist, Arzef—whose domains are clearly metonymic representations of the possibilities and limits of Jewish cultural production in interwar Palestine. Their products’

hybrid status as both natural and manmade foregrounds the degree to which objects mediate human relations and potentially shape the production of a national self. The olive-wood frames, books, and ritual objects are purchased by Christian pilgrims, and Arzef's stuffed animals are displayed in European museums, thus embedding an emergent national Jewish culture within a transnational setting of creation and exchange. At the same time, these creations serve as foils for the novel's chief figure of non-human thing-making: Balak, the dog. Balak's animal pedigree is undeniable; however, given the presence of script written by a human hand on his skin, Balak is also a book—specifically, a scroll, prepared by Yitzhak Kummer, “the scribe,” and treated as such by the various communities in Jerusalem who are challenged to interpret him. The novel's complex rendering of the artistic process across a wide range of materials reaches its peak in Balak's wandering through the city, a movement that demonstrates how both animals and ostensibly inanimate objects may display agency and become, borrowing Ian Hodder's term, “entangled” with their implicit subjects (20).

Animals and objects are both examples of what Bruno Latour has termed “hybrids” (*We Have Never Been Modern* 3). Insisting on the principle of relationality rather than essential dualisms and distinct, stable entities, the hybrid exists at the seam between animal and human, as well as that between the social and the material or technological (“Berlin Key”). While crafted objects may be the product of human labor, they continue to exist in and of themselves, mediating the hands that made them and producing their own proliferating meaning. This distinction between materials and ideas is of course at the heart of Marx's description of a commodity. Within *Just Yesterday*, the narrative turns on attention to things created from “Nature” through an act of imaginative abstraction; the objects of taxidermy and olive-wood craft support the novel's discussion regarding a new, national Jewish culture in Palestine, a discourse that culminates in the creation and circulation of Balak-the-dog. For Freud, Lévi-Strauss, and—to a lesser extent—Marx, the meaning of the material object resides in some relation to human activities. Indeed, this, according to Brown, constitutes the very essence of thingness: “The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (“Thing Theory” 4). But although subject-object relations shape the narrative meaning of materiality in *Just Yesterday*, we find something else as well: a sustained attention to the *relation*, itself, and its eventual dissolution in the presence of the hybrid.

Yitzhak first learns of olive-wood crafts from Bloykof, who excels as a creator of olive-wood objects, especially picture frames, and trains Yitzhak as a housepainter. Bloykof has a pragmatic attitude towards his craft—“I was foolish and I thought everything preceded from ideas and I didn't know that the main thing about painting is painting” (250/241)<sup>9</sup>—that recalls Marx's distinction regarding the play between materiality and ideas, the way in which a chair's wood becomes “transcendent” through its commodification and entry into the marketplace. Bloykof's devotion to “painting as painting” is evident as he trains Yitzhak to support himself

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<sup>9</sup> Parenthetical references to the novel cite the page number of the English translation *Just Yesterday* followed by the page number of the Hebrew edition *Tmol Shilshom*.

through commercial signs and domestic interiors—as a result of which Yitzhak becomes financially self-sufficient, an independent laborer, and, ultimately, a more eligible bachelor.

The Bezalel Academy of Jewish Arts and Crafts whose students Yitzhak encounters was founded in 1906 with the belief that art could contribute to the national enterprise. The academy exemplified maskilic notions of art's rehabilitative utility in an effort to help Jews become productive by teaching them skills, finding them work, and so freeing them from the charity of Jerusalem's *halukkah*: "The assumption was that education in crafts and trade would give the population not only work but also an outlet for individual expression; it would add value to the products and thus increase their competitiveness" (Manor 144). Bezalel taught students to create a variety of decorative and religious objects meant for domestic and foreign markets; olive-wood frames inlaid with seashells were one of the school's early areas of specialization (see also Ofra). Some of the school's early supporters understood that its virtues resided in a devotion to traditional handicraft. Writing in 1907 in the British newspaper the *Jewish Chronicle*, Dr. Otto Warburg claimed that "in this age of large industries dominated by machinery... the individuality of the workman is dying before the mechanical contrivances which turn out all kinds of work to a given pattern in a given time" (qtd. in Manor 150). Warburg's comments recall Benjamin's analysis of the fate of art's "aura" in the "age of mechanical reproduction" and demonstrate how transnational economic forces shaped modern Jewish cultural expression.

One long chapter in the novel describes the plight of Bezalel-trained Jewish artisans working for a German Christian business owner, who sells the objects abroad; the group tries to raise funds and organize their own shop, but their efforts are ultimately defeated, in part by accusations of blood libel (525). The local production of religious artifacts from olive-wood, ostensibly part of a new economic regime, is thus mapped onto relations between Jews and gentiles in Europe, relations in which the threat of commercial disruption is quelled through anti-Semitic violence. Jerusalem's olive-wood industry seems to be a special case of what Arjun Appadurai calls "tourist art": that is, "objects produced for aesthetic, ceremonial, or sumptuary use in small face-to-face communities [that] are transformed culturally, economically, and socially by tastes, markets and ideologies of larger economies" (26). While these objects of religious ritual art were products of a colonial enterprise, with the production and exchange of indigenous materials marking a relation between East and West (cf. Liu), they were also part of the local cultural economy. The novel's formal structure, with the first half taking place largely in Jaffa and the second unfolding in Jerusalem, places two formidable, potentially competing, cultural options front and center. Indeed, Bloykof's frames are ubiquitous items in early Zionist Palestine:

[They] are found in the home of every Hebrew writer in Jaffa and Jerusalem. Those frames are made of olive wood in the shape of a Magen David inlaid with seashells, but the teachers of Jaffa who have a literary bent put the pictures of our writers and poets in them, the greatest one in the middle and his satellites around him, including pictures of themselves, for there isn't one single teacher in Jaffa who doesn't see himself as a writer, unlike the teachers of Jerusalem who see themselves as sages and who put pictures of our great sages including pictures of themselves in those frames. (217/209)

The “framing” of writers in these souvenir objects literally embeds authors within the material world of commerce and exchange. The equivalence between the two groups of writers—one (in Jaffa) presumably “secular” and the other (the Jerusalem sages) presumably devoted to “religious” matters—is commensurate with the novel’s staging of an emergent national culture through distinctions between these two cities and their populations. That the craftsmen are described as “working like slaves and . . . starving like dogs” (554) creates a proposition borne out in the novel’s elevation of Balak as a philosopher-dog, a true artist, thoughtful and creative and even textual, but also concerned with the material world of food and fleas.

Readers are first introduced to Arzef and his work when Yitzhak moves from Jaffa to Jerusalem:

Arzef lives alone like the First Adam in the Garden of Eden, with no wife and no sons and no cares and no troubles, among all kinds of livestock and animals and birds and insects and reptiles and snakes and scorpions. He dwells with them in peace, and even when he takes their soul, they don’t demand his blood in exchange, since they enter the great museums of Europe because of him, and professors and scholars flock to his door and give him honorary degrees and money. . . . [but this doesn’t have any meaning for him]. Important to Arzef are the livestock and animals and birds and insects and reptiles mentioned in the writings of the Holy Ones in the two Talmuds, which dwell in the Land of Israel. Arzef hunts them and throws away their flesh and fills their skin so they will be preserved. (241–42/234)

If Arzef is “the First Adam,” then naming—Adam’s primary obligation toward his animal fellows—is figured in this passage as both death and memorial practice. Language ironically both destroys and enacts a kind of presence, a material marker of the animal’s absence. Arzef’s work is also implicitly connected to the Zionist project of inventing a “Hebrew landscape” (see Benvenisti) through its attention to Talmudic flora and fauna. Indeed, taxidermy has historically acted as a point of negotiation between old and new worlds, between ostensibly established European orders and colonial projects, whether in the Americas or in the Middle East (see Poliquin). The “strong colonial resonance of taxidermy as a form” (Walther 74) is borne out, in part, through the depiction of Arzef’s work being displayed in “the great museums of Europe” and the professional, financial attention of (presumably) Orientalist scholars. The trade of taxidermic specimens within the novel’s commercial realm also allows their essential ambiguity to be directly referenced. For example, Arzef debates a customs official “who had trouble assessing how much customs duties to impose on them [a pair of stuffed skins], either the rate for live animals but they weren’t alive, or the rate for inanimate objects but they did have skin and they did have bones” (458/434). This stubborn ability to exist simultaneously as part of nature and culture is, according to Rachel Poliquin, “the irresolvable tension that defines all taxidermy” (5). There is also, arguably, something quintessentially “transcendent” and “grotesque” about taxidermy as an art form—extending, even eternalizing, the life of a natural being (more powerful, perhaps, than the First Adam) but in a form that also always reminds the viewer of death.

The character of Arzef appears to have been modeled, in part, on the zoologist Yisrael Aharoni. A photograph from the 1940s at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, features Aharoni as a lab-coated professor holding a bone and providing a zoological lesson in Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic on the blackboard behind him ([https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9c/Israel\\_Aharoni\\_during\\_a](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9c/Israel_Aharoni_during_a)

lecture.jpg). He is framed by two complete specimens (a bird and a rodent)—literally, “arranged skins” (taxidermy)—and surrounded by smaller pieces of skeleton. These fragments, partial souvenirs, hint at some once-vibrant whole. The bird and rodent are also each potentially related to some larger collection, classified by species and type. These calibrated differences between the animal remains potentially destabilize the seemingly ironclad distinction between animal and human (see Calarco); by recognizing the multitudes contained within the former term, we are asked to interrogate the possibilities for difference within the latter—a quality also alluded to by the blackboard’s polyphonic linguistic terrain. However, these observations are possible only when we turn away from the man in the lab-coat and the etymological lesson on the blackboard to consider the thing itself, and not, to paraphrase Williams, the ideas in it.

Arzef is linked to Balak both through the practice of taxidermy and the fatal focus on Balak’s skin, upon which Yitzhak has—on a whim—painted the Hebrew word for dog, *kelev*, which can be read backwards as Balak. We are told twice that dogs are exempt from Arzef’s reach: “A lot of stuffed skins Isaac had seen at Arzef’s, but the stuffed skin of a dog he hadn’t seen” (413/392). In another scene Sweetfoot admonishes his dog when he barks at Yitzhak: “Sweetiepie, if you don’t shut up, I’ll take you to Arzef. Zundle patted the dog with his feet and told him, Don’t be scared, never did Arzef make a stuffed skin of a dog” (567/536). The relation between Arzef and this dog, who is also a walking signifier of sorts, should remind readers that books, historically, have been made from animal corpses (see Holsinger 619). Well into the early modern era, animal skins were used to create vellum or parchment, and animal bones were the source of the glue used in binding. Balak has Hebrew letters—a kind of holy script—written upon his fur; so, too, Arzef is not only a taxidermist but also a kind of bookmaker—an artisan working with animal skin.

I offer this reading of Balak as a scripted hybrid or walking book because it embeds him in the novel’s concern with made objects—specifically, objects that straddle the relation between nature and culture. Capitalizing on and complicating Agnon’s treatment of materiality in taxidermy and olive-wood craft, Balak is the novel’s greatest “thing,” as well as its most memorable rendering of an entity who fully embodies, and suffers, the dissolution of the nature-culture divide. Yet, although Balak’s symbolic value is prolific (notably spoofed within the journalistic accounts and rumors regarding the dog’s meaning), and the imaginative investment in his skin and perambulatory habits considerable, Balak himself remains inscrutable, irreducible, and beholden only to himself. As a made object, he succeeds in escaping the market’s commodified logic because of his uniqueness and residual and mobile aura.

Agnon’s modernist novel is not as directly implicated in the slaughter of animals as medieval parchment manuscripts; however, the novel seems to suggest that certain traditional norms regarding the text’s embodied qualities may endure in modern settings. Just as olive-wood crafts may preserve substantive traits of premodern art (their status in religious ritual; their potential aura as individual, handmade creations), so too the book—in Agnon’s hands—struggles to retain some of its status as a document of communal consequence, even as it becomes an object of economic exchange. Certainly the figure of the writer in Agnon’s work is a complex amalgam of the solitary modernist genius, alone in his room—Hemdat, in the

earlier stories—and the scribe, a more traditional figure embedded in his community and in a world of craft, of writing as a kind of physical, artisanal extension of the author's hand.

In the years following the publication of *Just Yesterday*, Agnon was involved in the writing of *Sefer Buczacz* (1955). *The Buczacz Book* is a *yizkor* (memorial) book, a new-old genre whose function goes beyond the memorialization that typified its pre-modern antecedents (for example, *pinkasim*). Those earlier documents included anecdotal, impressionistic accounts alongside lists of important events and personalities associated with a particular town, often in the wake of disaster or anti-Semitic violence. *Yizkor* books, however, offer more than just a postwar, historical record of towns that were largely wiped out in the Shoah; they are conceived as artifacts and often referred to by their authors as objects such as a gravestone or memorial candle for the destroyed town. As a genre, they confirm Barbara Benedict's observation that "historically, literary genres have always emerged from the conditions of their production" (235). As such, *yizkor* books constitute compelling evidence regarding the immense importance of material forms for Jewish cultures during the years in which the material foundations of many Jewish communities were under attack. The ethnographic project of S. An-sky, discussed in this essay's opening paragraphs, privileged objects and photographs over written accounts as a way to preserve a vanishing civilization and connect an alienated intelligentsia to its cultural roots. The *yizkor* books extend this prewar work, creating a new transnational genre in which writing itself becomes an object. Understood in relation to the material concerns of fiction discussed in this essay, *yizkor* books represent a deepening of the anxiety over writing's value during an era of tremendous social and political instability.

The material preoccupations of novels by Bergelson, Roth, and Agnon, with their commodified, evocative, and hybrid objects, can be read in relation to the cataclysmic changes that shaped Jewish modernity. The novel's generic conditions offer an arena in which things are observed and coded in the widest possible terms; that is, the novel's formal "affordances," to borrow Caroline Lévine's term, allow for a certain set of object lessons. These novels, whose writing and publication straddle the horrors of the midcentury, therefore exemplify one way in which modern Jewish literature has been reconceived as material form.

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