

SENTIENT DOGS, LIBERATED RAMS,
AND TALKING ASSES:
AGNON'S BIBLICAL ZOO
*or Rereading Tmol shilshom**

by

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“Pnei hador kifnei ha-kelev.”

Every generation has its dogface.

—Rabbi Grunam Yekum Purkan¹

The conclusion of *Tmol shilshom* is as satisfying as the climax of a Wagnerian opera or a Cecil B. De Mille movie. There is human sacrifice and there are claps of thunder and torrents of rain and cosmic evidence of divine wrath expended and placated. Nor does the novel's melodramatic end fail to satisfy its hyperbolic beginning: Isaac Kumer the *naif*, whose inflated dream of Zion carried the seeds of its own destruction, is bitten by a mad dog and sacrificed on the altar of the most primitive version of Jewish theodicy.

The denouement is so dramatic that it threatens to reduce the novel to the bare contours of its plot. Arguably the most canonical of modern Hebrew fictions, S. Y. Agnon's *Tmol shilshom* remains, despite much deciphering and decoding, also the most mysterious. It is, briefly, the story of a man and of a dog. Not a man and *his* dog. Rather, it is the tale, rendered in realistic prose, of a man of average stature, Isaac Kumer, a dreamer who proves useless in his father's shop in Galicia

**This essay is dedicated to the students in my graduate seminars on Agnon at the Hebrew University in 2001 and 2002, whose wonderful insights punctuate these pages; and especially to my student and research assistant, Natasha Gordinsky, who gave unstintingly of her detective skills, her indomitable curiosity and the delicacy and integrity of her mind and soul.*

1. S. Y. Agnon, *Tmol shilshom* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1971), p. 586. All Hebrew references noted in the text are from this edition. Unless otherwise specified, all English references are from *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). *Only Yesterday* appeared in English 'only' a few years ago; at a distance of more than half a century from the original publication of the novel; it also furnishes one of the most recent acts of interpretation.

I have taken liberties with the English text for my epigraph. The more accurate translation is Harshav's: "The face of the generation is like the face of a dog." It continues: "And not just an ordinary dog, but a crazy dog. [p. 621]" (Harshav renders the preacher's name as Rabbi Grunam May-Salvation-Arise.) R. Grunam's talmudic proof-text for this sermon actually appears in a number of places, including BT *Sanhedrin* 97a and M. *Sotah* 9:15; invariably, the image signals the coming of the Messiah as predicated on the dissolution of all social and human dignity.

and is dispatched to the land of his dreams. Linking his story to the grand narrative of Israel's national rebirth during the period that would come to be referred to as the Second Aliyah (1908–11), Isaac fails almost immediately at his ambition to become a pioneer in the Land of Israel, as he fails at his love for the bohemian Sonia in the coffee houses of Jaffa. He reinvents himself in the alleyways of Jerusalem, gaining some professional stature as a house- and sign-painter and a measure of personal happiness in his requited and, eventually, consummated love for the pious Shifra. Isaac's chance meeting with a stray dog at the moment of his greatest contentment and hard-won equilibrium, and his frivolous and mendacious painting of the words "crazy dog" on the canine's back, mark a shift in the novel's center of gravity—both in the focus of consciousness, from human to animal, and in the texture of the prose, from realism to something I will call, for the moment, "magical realism." The narrator's interest moves to the mind of the accursed dog, 'Balak,'² whose peregrinations through Jerusalem's ultra-orthodox neighborhoods in search of food and kindness—or, failing that, some comprehension of his out-cast state, the code to which he knows to be inscribed on his back—lead directly to his last, fatal encounter with the painter who branded him. Looking not so much for vengeance as for truth incarnate, Balak sinks his now-rabid teeth into Isaac's flesh and brings about his ghastly death.

Read as theodicy, through the topos of the *'akedah*, the fate of this latter-day Isaac is not a reenactment but a fulfillment of the ancient story of aborted human sacrifice. Nothing unusual there: most retellings of the *'akedah*—Jewish and Christian—brook no substitutes, no rams, no last-minute interventions. Even the animal who appears in this novel is not a replacement for but *the very instrument of* Isaac's death—endowed, furthermore, with the consciousness of his own deed. What is, nevertheless, highly unusual for a modern theodicy is both the hideous detail and the level of authorial assent implied in the salvific effects of that death.³

Although many readers who belonged to the century about which, and in which, *Tmol shilshom* was written seemed able to dismiss the topos of the *'akedah*, preferring to read the novel as an epic of the Second Aliyah, we do not seem to have the same luxury. This is not only because the metonymic evidence is, as we shall see, so abundant and the denouement so imposing that they overwhelm the quieter claims of the text, but also because of our own epistemic turn at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The opaque intertextuality of any page of Agnon's prose creates the puzzles that keep his fictions alive and unresolved. Deciphering or decoding Agnon is a lifelong and intergenerational pursuit, as purposeful—or as fanciful—as any midrashic enterprise. Some critics are convinced that if we just try harder—with

2. So named because the principal of the "Alliance Israel" French school read the letters (K-L-B in Hebrew) on his back "as was his wont from left to right." "Well then," confides the narrator to the reader, "we can call him Balak, too. And what was his name, perhaps he had a name and it sank and perhaps he didn't have a name . . ." (*Only Yesterday*, p. 303; *Tmol shilshom*, pp. 291–292). Agnon, as is his wont, takes liberties with orthography here, exchanging the letter "kuf" in Balak's name for the "kaf" in "*kelev*" [dog]. Balak has actually appeared by name a few pages before this etymological disquisition. (*Only Yesterday*, p. 299; *Tmol Shilshom*, p. 288).

3. The narrator, however, does express his dismay at such undeserved punishment; see below.

more money, more time, more research assistants—we will uncover the hidden truth⁴; others assume that every generation adds its own bricks and mortar to what must remain forever incomplete, a sort of Gaudi-like tribute to the endless quest for Agnon's secret.⁵ By endorsing the latter position, that the secret is not a riddle to be solved but an enigma to be honored, I am also suggesting that every layer of critical prose is not only mortar for that edifice, but, rather, a mirror of the mason's face. In the century—or millennium—that was inaugurated with the renewed escalation of hostilities in the Holy Land, the dominant image in our mirror may be our own terror of impending apocalypse; resonating with the apocalyptic vision in *Tmol shilshom*, we can easily be tempted to revert to the most intractable of Jewish myths as a way of declaring the bankruptcy of other paradigms—Greek tragic or modernist psychoanalytic or even Zionist utopian—to explain the workings of Jewish history and the presentations of the Jewish imagination.

This essay will attempt to argue against such apocalyptic determinism by suggesting that, as readers in the text (and actors in the world), we might pursue critical possibilities embedded in other biblical subtexts. The *ʿakedah* may function here, as it has in the religious imagination for over two thousand years, as the explicit governing mythos. It is dogged, however, by that other, somewhat neglected chapter in the biography of ancient Israel: “*parashat balak*” (Num. 22–24).⁶ I suggest we follow the “Balak trail” to its source, not for its explicit theme but, rather, for its texture, for its implicit invitation to a more indeterminate, unresolvable fount of mystery, meaning, and authority. Granted, the eponymous figure in the biblical passage from the book of Numbers is neither the main character nor the center of narrative attention in the story, which is Balaam's. It is not in specific parallels between Agnon's dog and his royal namesake, the king of Moab, but in the narratological elements in the biblical story in which this character appears—

4. See Dan Miron, “*Mi-mashal le-sipur toledi*,” (*petiḥa le-diun bi-Tmol shilshom*)” [From Parable to Chronicle: Preliminary Discussion of *Tmol shilshom*], in *Kovetz Agnon*, II, eds. Emuna Yaron et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), pp. 94ff.

5. Dov Sadan was one of the first of Agnon's contemporaries to acknowledge the tentative nature of every hermeneutic act and to suggest, slyly, that every commentator write in parentheses at the top of his exegesis an admonition to both himself and his readers: “(For the time being)” [*lefi shaʿah*]. *ʿAl Shai Agnon: masaʿiyyun ve-ḥeker* [Studies in S. Y. Agnon] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz hameuhad, 1973), p. 66. See Nitza Ben Dov's elaboration of this argument in *Ahavot lo meʿusharot: tiskul eroti, omanut va-mavet be-yizirat Agnon* [Unhappy/Unapproved Loves: Erotic Frustration, Art and Death in Agnon's Fiction] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), pp. 377–380. Agnon anticipated this hermeneutic tentativeness in his very first story, “Agunot,” which concludes with the advisory that “*le-elokim pitronim*”—one of those untranslatable idiomatic phrases that is rendered by Baruch Hochman as “but God alone knows for a fact.” “Agunot,” trans. Baruch Hochman, in *Modern Hebrew Literature*, ed. Robert Alter (New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1975), p. 194. The phrase “*le-elokim pitronim*” is biblical in origin; as Joseph's response to the request for dream-interpretation of Pharaoh's chief butler and baker (Gen. 40:8), it acknowledges the divine adjudication (and therefore temporary nature) of all human hermeneutics. I am grateful to my student, Sara Henna Polen, for bringing the Joseph text to my attention. Precisely because *Tmol shilshom* is less dense with classical intertexts than a novella like *Bilvav yamim* or a story like “*Tehila*” or “*Ido ve-enam*,” the riddle seems to be more deeply embedded.

6. Agnon himself first leads us to the biblical passage by referring to “*parashat balak*” in a letter to Baruch Kurzweil. See letter quoted in Dan Laor, *Hayei Agnon* [S. Y. Agnon: A Biography] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998) p. 375.

and the threads it supplies to other biblical passages—that a possible alternative reading of the entire novel lies. The Balak/Balaam story licenses a different approach to the intrusion of the supernatural in a realistic narrative, a different apprehension of the human-animal encounter, and a different understanding of symbolic mediation in the representation of reality.

There is a way in which the Balak trail can lead us back to the first, pristine, readings of *Tmol shilshom*. Advertised for its social panorama of the Second Aliyah, the narrative, which appeared in two volumes in 1945–46, seemed to satisfy the long-awaited expectations of two generations of Zionist architects and laborers. In awarding the author the Menahem Ussishkin Prize for his accurate representation (“*realiut*”) of their world,⁷ Agnon’s admiring contemporaries had to repress or marginalize the two main discrepancies between the text and their appraisal of it: the appearance of a sentient dog in a realistic novel, and the ending that finishes off the hero with a death so horribly redemptive that all attempts to naturalize it into a worldview that valorizes human deeds and social realities are doomed to failure.⁸

The reading that I am suggesting allows us to recover some of this original faith in the material world represented by the realism of the human comedy, without sacrificing the mystery introduced by Balak’s consciousness and by his hideous final act. It is meant to privilege and affirm the natural world while remaining both available to and skeptical about the supernatural. To the naïve hopefulness of Agnon’s contemporary readers and our own generation’s apocalyptic determinism, this approach is meant to add a more tentative epistemological dimension—and to argue that the two impulses reflected, respectively, in the *‘akedah* and *parashat balak* are powerful contenders for a Jewish aesthetic and moral stance in the world after 1945.

7. In his literary biography of Agnon, Dan Laor dramatically evokes the ceremony on August 28, 1946, in which *Tmol shilshom* was awarded the Ussishkin prize for its “astounding realism.” (Laor, *Hayei Agnon*, p. 366). The advertisement in the newspaper *Ha’arets* trumpeted the book as a “great paeon to the enterprise of building The Land during the period of the Second Aliyah. With the magical sceptre of simplicity of language, Agnon brings to life before our eyes days of yore” (*ibid.*, p. 367). What we can call the “Dickensian” approach to social realism is embodied in the novel in the character of Gorishkin, who wants “only to be the writer of the Land of Israel” and can’t decide whether to write “things as they are . . . or novels . . . [that are] likely to appeal to the heart and lead to action” (*Only Yesterday*, pp. 108–109; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 107).

8. Barukh Kurzweil, who hailed the novel as “the most important and successful experiment in the field of the social novel in our modern literature,” did admit in a private exchange of letters with Agnon his bafflement over the irreconcilable appearance of the dog Balak in Isaac’s story. Kurzweil’s letter and Agnon’s response opened the door to decades of critical debate over the genesis and unity of the text. Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot ‘al sippurei Shai Agnon* [Essays on the Stories of S.Y. Agnon] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962), p. 104. See also Boaz Arpali’s question of how the story of the dog Balak fits into a “social-psychological novel” [*roman hevrati-psychologi*] featuring Isaac. “*Balak ke-feshuto u-kemidrasho*” [Balak as real and as *midrash*], *Kovetz Agnon II*, p. 167.

There was an attempt made to “naturalize” even the hideous fate of Isaac Kumer: the horrible details of death by rabies, depending as they do on a medical report widely circulated in the Yishuv at the time, could, it seems, indeed, be read as a “realistic” representation of the “average” death of an “average” Zionist idealist. See Laor, *Hayei Agnon*, p. 370.

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If reading the *ʿakedah* back into the text resolves the riddle of its end by displacing the social novel of pitiful human action with the ultimate myth of sacrifice and redemption, reading *parashat balak* back into the text can serve to restore the human dimension and a respect for the quotidian while augmenting a sense of enigma. In conflating distinct domains, both riddles and enigmas “produce change in the world,” in the words of Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman. The first invites attempts to find closure and resolution through “disambiguating and disentangling”⁹ those domains; the second allows for a more open-ended engagement with mystery. The enigmatic approach that I wish to endorse was articulated by T. W. Adorno as an article of faith:

Aesthetics cannot hope to grasp works of art if it treats them as hermeneutical objects. What at present needs to be grasped is their unintelligibility . . . Achieving an adequate interpretive understanding of a work of art means demystifying certain enigmatic dimensions without trying to shed light on its constitutive enigma . . . To solve a riddle in art is to identify the reason why it is insoluble—which is the gaze art works direct at the viewer.¹⁰

Parashat Balak can both lead us to the constitutive enigma in Agnon’s novel and enable us to respect without demystifying its unintelligibility. The introduction of a sentient dog as Isaac’s counterpart in this novel, like the introduction of a talking ass as Balaam’s counterpart in the biblical narrative, does not displace but, rather, destabilizes an otherwise internally-consistent, realistic discourse, and licenses *undecidability* as an alternative hermeneutic principle. What emerges, I will argue, is a more fluid, enigmatic, humanistic and “novelistic”¹¹ reading than the one that privileges the *ʿakedah*—a reading consistent with the subliminal themes of the novel and the postmodern stance of uncertainty, skepticism, and humility.

ISAAC BOUND: MYTH OR FICTION?

They bound Isaac with ropes and put him in a room by himself . . . In the end the muscles of his body and the muscles of his face became paralyzed. Finally, his pained soul passed away and he returned his spirit to the God of spirits for whom there is no joke and no frivolity.¹²

9. Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman, *Untying the Knot: on Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 5.

10. T. W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 173, 177, 179.

11. For the purposes of this essay, I am equating “*parashat balak*” with what Robert Alter or Dan Miron would call “novelistic thinking” and “*akedat yitzhak*” with the myth and theodicy that displace or supersede the fictive. The phrase is Alter’s; see *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 73; and *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988). The path-breaking work of Mikhail Bakhtin is, of course, central to this entire discussion.

12. *Only Yesterday*, p. 640; *Tmol shilsom*, p. 605.

The presence of the *‘akedah* automatically elevates mythic claims above fictive process.¹³ Søren Kierkegaard warned us 160 years ago that Abraham’s test was not to be emulated, that in the gray dawn of monotheism (“it was early morning”), there was a momentary “teleological suspension of the ethical” performed by an inimitable “knight of faith.”¹⁴ That warning, like the *peshat* itself, is systematically ignored in every imaginative retelling of the *‘akedah*, whether in endorsement of or in protest against the world in which the deity requires fathers to sacrifice their sons. However, any act of representation presupposes emulation, and, as such, every signifying act undertakes to mitigate the uniqueness, the *horror religiosus* of that story, by domesticating it. Midrashic attempts to fill in the gaps in the laconic narrative also expose the conflict between mythic and fictive forms of engaging the world.¹⁵ Whenever this constitutive story is re-imagined, as Kierkegaard himself tries repeatedly to do in a series of fictional exercises,¹⁶ it threat-

13. Frank Kermode’s rather schematic generic distinction is useful here: “Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual which presupposes total and adequate explanations of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional, assent.” *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 39. See also Thomas G. Pavel: “For their users, myths do not need *explanada*, since as paradigms of sense they furnish explanations for profane events . . . To be understood and justified, precarious existence needs the support of archetypal chains of events” *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 131–132. See also Ernst Cassirer’s definition of myth as representing a “‘level of consciousness where tension with the body of our knowledge has not yet appeared,’” quoted in Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 214. For a different view, see Guy Stroumsa’s definition of myth as a potentially more ambiguous, even enigmatic form: “The identification of myth as enigma enabled late antique thinkers to see myths as early expressions of a basically ambivalent truth.” “Myth as Enigma: Cultural Hermeneutics in late Antiquity,” in *Untying the Knot*, p. 272.

14. *Fear and Trembling, The Kierkegaard Reader*, eds. Jane Chamberlain and Jonathan Reé (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 84, 93.

15. Even though Erich Auerbach regards both the laconic narrative in Genesis and the plentitude of Homeric description as forms of realism, the story from Gen. 22 has taken on the status of myth in subsequent retellings. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 8–11.

16. “It was early morning. Abraham rose in good time, had the asses saddled and left his tent, taking Isaac with him, but Sarah watched them from the window . . . until she could see them no more . . . [On Mt. Moriah, Abraham] turned away from Isaac for a moment, but when Isaac saw his face a second time it was changed, his gaze was wild, his mien one of horror. He caught Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground and said, ‘Foolish boy, do you believe I am your father? I am an idolator. Do you believe this is God’s command? No, it is my own desire.’ Then Isaac trembled and in his anguish cried ‘God in heaven have mercy on me . . . If I have no father on earth, then be Thou my father!’ But below his breath Abraham said to himself: ‘Lord in heaven I thank Thee; it is after all better that he believe I am a monster than that he lose faith in Thee . . .’

“It was early in the morning. Abraham rose in good time, embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac . . . [On Mt. Moriah, Abraham] silently drew the knife. Then he saw the ram that God had appointed. He sacrificed that and returned home . . . From that day on, Abraham became old, he could not forget that God had demanded this of him . . .

“It was early morning. Everything had been made ready for the journey in Abraham’s house . . . Then they turned home again and Sarah ran to meet them, but Isaac had lost his faith. Never a word in

ens—or promises—to enter the realm of the ethical, the universal, where it would break the bonds of its own silent acquiescence to an inscrutable, peremptory and morally perverse command.

The quotidian, the domestic, the midrashic, expressed as an infinity of fictional digressions, impedes the inexorable progress toward the telos. When Franz Kafka imagines Abraham for himself, it is an Abraham who, though “prepared to satisfy the demand for a sacrifice immediately... certainly would have never gotten to be a patriarch or even an old-clothes dealer”; he is, simply, “unable to bring it off because he could not get away, being indispensable; the household needed him, there was perpetually something or other to put in order, the house was never Ready.”¹⁷

So when Agnon’s noisy conclusion to his 607-page novel reinstates the telos in all its terrible grandeur, it is by way of declaring the house “Ready” through putting an end to what might be called the “ethics of imagination,” closing the fiction with a peremptory act of authorial finality. Whatever agency might have been ascribed to Isaac as he slowly gained stature throughout the course of his narrative; whatever digressions he may have been permitted into the byways and alleyways of a private life; whatever dignity he might have reached as a diminished but still recognizable embodiment of a modern hero connected to his fate by his deeds, by some eventual recognition of the consequences of those deeds, and by a healthy dose of contingency—all are drowned out in the thunder of apocalypse.

Most of the critical debate on what is surely Agnon’s bleakest and most powerful novel has revolved around generic questions prompted by the internal inconsistencies or contradictions in the narrative. At first glance, it seems a futile exercise, as each of these genres—social realism, satire, epic, tragedy—are defeated by an end that consumes all contenders like Moloch consuming the children. Defined by one reader as a “*rav-roman*,” or polygeneric, novel,¹⁸ this narrative appears to be trying on and discarding fictional discourses like so many ill-fitting clothes, and then, finally satisfied with the fit of the *ʿakedah*, binds Isaac to an ending that corroborates the most mythic reading and accords some symbolic unity to its parts. Only the *ʿakedah*, it seems, can bear the weight of its hideous conclusion. That is, whether Isaac is punished for his “sins” or whether he is the innocent scapegoat projected as an ironic, anachronistic sacrifice in a pitiless cosmos—whether his fate is redemptive, absurd, or grotesque—his death is seen as superseding all the other claims of the novel.¹⁹ That is, we might imagine, Agnon’s last word, conveying, depending on one’s point of view, either the mystery or the absurdity of Jewish theodicy.

the whole world is spoken of this, and Isaac told no one of what he had seen, and Abraham never suspected that anyone had seen it.” *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 81–83.

17. From a letter to Robert Klopstock, June, 1921. *Franz Kafka: Briefe 1902–1924*, from *Franz Kafka/ Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg: S. Fischer Verlag, 1966), p. 332. Translated as “Abraham” in *The Basic Kafka*, Introduction by Erich Heller (New York: Washington Square Press, 1979), p. 172.

18. This is the title and subject of Boaz Arpali’s book. *Rav roman: hamisha ma’amarim ʿal Tmol shilshom me-et S. Y. Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz hameuhad, 1998).

19. “Abraham is . . . at no instant the tragic hero, but something quite different, either a murderer or a man of faith,” argues Kierkegaard (*Fear and Trembling*, p. 86). Where Abraham is either a man of faith or a murderer, Isaac cannot be a tragic hero either.

Yet, the ongoing generic debates are instructive, for they reveal that there is some recalcitrant current that runs through the narrative, preventing its readers from relinquishing the “novelistic thinking” at its heart. Although there are those who still value *Tmol shilshom* for its social or even “documentary” quality,²⁰ the most interesting discussions in recent years have reclaimed it for its tragic vision.²¹ That there are overlaps between the claims of sacrificial myth and tragedy is germane to this discussion²²: I want to suggest that the “overlap” here is the mythic colonization of the space of ethical imagination and the silencing of the tragic figure. But it doesn’t quite succeed. The focus on the tragic quality of this novel can be seen as an attempt to relocate that figure in the sphere of both human accountability and human limitation.

20. See Avraham Holtz, who claims that *Tmol shilshom* belongs to the genre of “documentary fiction.” “*Hibonenu be-firtei Tmol shilshom*” [Reflecting on the details: *Tmol shilshom*], *Kovetz Agnon* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), pp. 178–221.

21. Dan Miron’s monumental exploration of *Tmol shilshom* goes through all the possible permutations of the novel, from tragedy to satire to social realism, montage, and melodrama, and then comes back to his original claim that the novel is tragic-epic. He both rescues Isaac as *l’homme moyen sensuel* with affinities to Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina and places him and Balak in the space first visited by Faust and Mephistopheles (in the guise of a dog). Miron, “*Mi-mashal le-sipur toladi*,” pp. 87–159; and “*Bein shtei neshamot: ha-analogia ha-faustit be-Tmol shilshom le-shai agnon*” [Between two Souls: the Faustian analogy in S. Y. Agnon’s *Tmol Shilshom*] in *Mi-vilna le-yerushalayim* [From Vilna to Jerusalem], eds. David Asaf, Israel Bartal, et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002), pp. 549–608. Gershon Shaked, Boaz Arpali and many others have argued for some version of the Greek tragic paradigm as informing *Tmol shilshom*. Arpali traces the structural evidence of classical tragedy in the novel and also compares Isaac to Karl in Kafka’s *Amerika. Rav roman*, pp. 104–111.

22. Terry Eagleton’s exploration of the “Idea of the Tragic” (whose cover is graced by Caravaggio’s graphic *Sacrifice of Isaac*) demonstrates how closely related tragedy is to the religious imagination, how closely related is the sacrificial figure, the *pharmakos*, Isaac, or even Abraham, to tragic figures such as Oedipus, Antigone and Lear. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: the Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); see especially pp. 274–297. Eagleton describes tragedy as “a humanistic displacement of religion,” and quotes Benjamin as defining tragic sacrifice as “‘the representative deed in which new contents of the people announce themselves’ . . . the performative act which brings a new social order into being.” [Ibid., p. 276].

Arnold Band, one of the first readers to call attention to the *‘akedah* as *topos* in the novel—as reflecting the author’s response to the catastrophe in Europe, which was concluded as he was concluding his novel—entitled his essay “Crime and Punishment,” implying the kind of affinity between a man’s deeds and his fate that belongs to the tragic imagination. Avraham Band, “*Ha-ḥet ve-onsho be-Tmol shilshom*” [Crime and Punishment in *Tmol shilshom*] *Molad*, Vol. 1, (new series) (24), 1967–8, pp. 75–81. But as in Miron’s analysis, the *‘akedah* is not presented here as mythic alternative to the tragic paradigm of sacrificial death; rather, it is invoked somewhat casually as the default mode of the Hebrew tragic imagination. Miron drops references to the *‘akedah* without further explanation as amplifying the tragic idea: “The story places *‘akedat yitzhak* and not the faith of Abraham as the principle myth of the period.” “*Bein shtei neshamot*,” p. 600. See also his claim that the story can be read as both an “absurd *‘akedah*” and as a “mystical *‘akedah*,” without further exploration. “*Mi-mashal le-sipur toladi*,” p. 93. In a fascinating essay on the transformations of the *‘akedah* as motif in Israeli literature, Yael Feldman refers, without elaboration, to *Tmol shilshom* as “the first ironic comment on the sacrificial posture of the pioneers,” presaging what she calls “an open Oedipal revolt against the memory of the received *Akedah*.” *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, eds. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 176. See also, on the *‘akedah* motif in *Tmol shilshom*, the work of Sarah Hagar and Hillel Weiss.

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The restless search for a better understanding of Isaac's fate is a kind of admission, then, that even at the end of this novel, the ostensibly resolved conflict between natural and supernatural authority leaves remainders, recalcitrant traces of discarded forms, that invite a kind of *hesitation*. Even the constitutive mystery is not resolved for more than a moment: As Hasan-Rokem and Shulman tell us about the deciphering of riddles, "'the solution' is no real answer; it is, at best, a temporary resting place in a continuing process of enigmatic self-occlusion."²³ It is this hesitation that will, in the reading I am proposing, prove to be the reader's most important resource. Eventually it will make space beneath the mythic overlay to recover the tragic and even the tragi-comic layers. The attention required for such a reading can also detect the almost-imperceptible but persistent development of Isaac's imagination, the "still small voice" beneath or behind or just before the storm.

ISAAC ON THE REBOUND: UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA

What will evolve as Isaac's "still small voice" and the reader's hesitant response begins only on second reading and only as a barely-perceived derivative or remainder of an epic battle. When encountered in a first reading of the novel, the mythic topos of the *ʿakedah* appears as the thunderous resolution of the rhythm that governs the novel, of the ongoing oscillation between promise and frustration as perfect worlds are constructed and deconstructed. Both Zionism and messianism have produced a dialectic of expectation and disappointment that yield, in the end, to the silencing authority of the *ʿakedah*. What informs the narrative from its opening sentence is a search for coherence and harmony in every domain—ideological, metaphysical and aesthetic. The first passage syncretizes memories and visions of perfection from ancient and modern sources:

Like all our brethren of the Second Aliya, the bearers of our salvation, Isaac Kumer left his country and his homeland and his city and ascended to the Land of Israel to build it from its destruction and to be rebuilt by it. From the day our comrade Isaac knew his mind, not a day went by that he didn't think about it. A blessed dwelling place was his image of the whole Land of Israel and its inhabitants blessed by God. Its villages hidden in the shade of vineyards and olive groves, the fields enveloped in grains and the orchard trees crowned with fruit, the valleys yielding flowers and the forest trees swaying; the whole firmament is sky blue and all the houses are filled with rejoicing. By day they plow and sow and plant and reap and gather and pick, threshing wheat and pressing wine, and at eventide they sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, his wife and his sons and daughters sitting with him, happy at their work and rejoicing in their sitting, and they reminisce about the days of yore Outside the Land like people who in happy times recall days of woe, and enjoy the good twice over. *A man of imagination was Isaac, what his heart desired, his imagination would conjure up for him.*²⁴

23. Hasan-Rokem and Shulman, p. 317.

24. *Only Yesterday*, p. 3; *Tmol shilsom*, p. 7. Emphasis mine.

Here we have a seamless or what Amos Oz calls a “naive” interweaving of Zionist-utopian and scriptural-messianic rhetoric—from the Bible to the Bilu.²⁵ The snake enters this garden, inevitably, just a few pages later, when Isaac Kumer has actually made the pilgrimage from his hometown in Galicia and arrives on the shores of Jaffa. No sooner does he disembark than he is attacked by sunstroke and disillusion:

An hour or two ago, he was drinking the air of other lands, and now he is drinking the air of the Land of Israel. No sooner had he collected his thoughts than the porters were standing around him and demanding money from him. He took out his purse and gave them. They demanded more. He gave them. They demanded more. Finally, they wanted *baksheesh*.

When he got rid of the Arabs, a Jew came and took Isaac’s belongings. He led him through markets and passages, alleys and yards . . . The sun is blazing above and the sand is burning below. Isaac’s flesh is an enveloping flame . . . His throat is hoarse and his tongue is like parched soil, and his lips are dry and his whole body is a jug of sweat . . . He looked in front of him and was stunned . . . [He found himself in a hostel where] the food was thin and the bedbugs were fat, the bugs sucked his blood by night as their owner sucked his blood by day.²⁶

The imagination of perfection is predicated on distance; it is in this sense that Isaac is originally presented as “a man of imagination” (*ba’al dimyot*).²⁷ The temptation to draw near, to step off the train or the ship onto dry land is, inevitably, to yield to the idyll’s counterpart—to the dystopia that is, quite simply but necessarily, the waking side of the dream.

This seesaw between utopia and dystopia, so central to Agnon’s kabbalistic aesthetic of repair and disrepair, perfection and dissolution—as adumbrated in his earliest “signature” story, “Agunot”²⁸—is only one of a series of binary moves that

25. Amos Oz, *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon’s Fear of God*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 63. For a more detailed discussion of this “naive synthesis,” see *ibid.*, pp. 75–8.

26. *Only Yesterday*, pp. 39–40; *Tmol shilsum*, pp. 40–41.

27. I am, as will be increasingly apparent, giving far more credit to Isaac as a man of imagination than most readers. Miron insists that as a “*ba’al dimyot*,” Isaac was unable to distinguish between preconceived notions and fantasy. “*Mi-mashal le-sipur toladi*,” p. 129.

28. The much-quoted opening of Agnon’s first story under his pseudonym (1908) can be read as a manifesto of all the fiction to come:

It is said: A thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory, sits and weaves—strand on strand—a prayer-shawl, all grace and all mercy, for the Congregation of Israel to deck herself in. Radiant in the light of her beauty she glows, even in these, the lands of her Exile, as she did in her youth in her Father’s house, in the Temple of her Sovereign and the city of sovereignty, Jerusalem . . . But there are times—alas!—when some hindrance creeps up, and snaps a thread in the loom. Then the prayer-shawl is damaged: evil spirits hover about it, enter into it, and tear it to shreds. (“Agunot,” p. 183).

The end of Eden is, then, the beginning of fiction.

dominate the rhythm of this text. We become so habituated to this rhythm that we automatically look for the dialectical “other” in every taxonomic field, whether geographical (Galicia and the Land of Israel [*ḥutza la-aretz* and *eretẓ ḥefetz*]; Jaffa and Jerusalem); erotic (Sonia and Shifra); zoological (Yitzḥak and Balak); ideological (secular Zionist and ultra-orthodox); or aesthetic (wholeness and fragmentation).

As we saw in the opening paragraphs, to be a “man of imagination” Outside the Land of Israel is to dream the return to an Eden subsumed in the rhetoric of Gordonian Zionism. “A constant stream of consciousness drifts through [Isaac’s] mind,” writes Benjamin Harshav in the introduction to the English translation; yet it is not really “consciousness that we are offered directly, but strings of quotations and formulaic, pious discourse”—what should be defined, he argues, not as intertextuality but as “alien discourse.”²⁹ Isaac, like so many of his brethren, is trapped in discourse. Amos Oz, in his very personal engagement with the book, claims that the gap between Isaac’s “imagination” and the reality of Palestine in the early twentieth century is the source of the ironic “‘pact’ between narrator and reader”; “such a tragic irony can work only if the reader actually does know how terrible the reality of the Land of Israel was”³⁰—something Isaac will of course find out immediately upon arrival.

I hope to show that the more significant voyage is not between “dream” and “reality,” rather, it is Isaac’s slow and tentative venture into the recesses of his own “imagination,” the discovery and acceptance of his own agency as “*ba’al dimyonot*.” A slow, tentative, and ultimately only partial journey out of the forms of discourse—utopian or magical—in which he is caught.

It is not really the horrors of “history” or “reality” that defeat ideal visions, but a kind of literary exigency that makes utopia the function of distance and dystopia or satire the necessary sequel to and deconstruction of utopia, carved out of proximity to the object of scrutiny.³¹ There *is* plenty of “reality” in this novel, as Agnon’s contemporaries were quick to appreciate. The narrative even appears in places like a precise snapshot of Jewish society in Palestine at the beginning of the twentieth century, under the sign, respectively, of the Zionist dream (Jaffa) and rigid Jewish pietism (Jerusalem).³² The other level of historical consciousness, the

29. Harshav, whose wife translated the book, prefers Bakhtin’s term “alien discourse” to “intertextuality” for the “ready-made phrases, stories, anecdotes and formulae” that are applied to “what-ever [Isaac’s] eyes encounter.” *Only Yesterday*, Introduction, p. xix.

30. Oz, *The Silence of Heaven*, p. 64.

31. Isaac’s imagination, first defined by his idyllic visions of the Holy Land conjured at a distance, will be reactivated soon after his departure from his hometown, but with another object and another lens—the view from the train window as he makes his way through Galicia and “Imperial” Austria (*Only Yesterday*, p. 20; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 24). The harmonizing gaze at parting from the homeland will later serve as the focus for nostalgia. The language of longing represents distance; a homogenized, idealized landscape under the benign aegis of Emperor Franz Josef, like the idyllic vision of the Holy Land, is a function of one’s remove from it.

32. The narrated time, spanning the period roughly from 1908 to 1911, is characterized by the accuracy of its descriptive passages, the presence of such explicitly historical figures as Y. H. Brenner and A. D. Gordon and such thinly-disguised figures as Hemdat (Agnon’s literary and biological progeny). See Oz’s summary of the critical consensus in decoding the identity of such figures. Oz, p. 177.

other reality that informs the novel—namely, the Nazi nightmare of the 1940s, the years during which the novel was being completed—weaves its way insidiously through these landscapes like the dark, brooding presence of clouds that never release their water.

Yet, the dialectical structure dictates that even with all this detail, it is not so much *history's* nightmare—the time during which this novel was written or even the time about which it was written—but the *deconstructed dream* that is, inevitably, its own foil. The prose, no matter how referential, is almost entirely bound by its own discursive principles. Not one but *two* dreams or utopian visions—the temporal Zionist and the activist messianist—intersect, overlap, and compete as models of artistic and social perfection. The nightmare is not so much the intrusion of “history” into the edenic picture, but the dialectically inevitable, self-inflicted mutilation of the perfect picture. Before Isaac is “done in” by the author through the agency of Balak, he is “done in” by the narrator through the agency of satire.

But this inexorably dystopic, satiric version of the dream masks what is, I believe, the more fundamental form of historical consciousness in *Tmol shilshom*: the judgment of human time; the present tense; the materiality of the surface, on any vision of perfection or redemption. In the noise and cacophony, the thunder and lightning, of the epic, melodramatic, or satiric sections of the novel, this voice is so quiet and tentative that it can easily be overlooked; so understated that it can only be heard by putting one's ear nearly to the ground; so diminutive that, like (as) the shrinking size of Isaac's imagination, it appears invisible or insignificant beside the works and words of his betters. Nonetheless, the pendulum's swing has succeeded only partially in camouflaging the slow but steady emergence of a subtle and nondialectical undervoice, the appearance of the smallest space between the portrait of human and social perfection or redemption and its default mode, between “*hehalom ve-shivro*.”

ISAAC BOUNDS BACK: THE DISENCHANTED IMAGINATION

In holding a magnifying glass to that space, or turning up the volume on that undervoice, I am, admittedly, reading against the grain of prevailing critical opinion. Even in the discussions of *Tmol shilshom* as a novel of social realism, Isaac himself is rarely accorded the dignity and singularity of his character. Seen as emblem or victim of his historical moment, he is variously described as the passive, superficial or even boring receptacle of full-blown ideologies—Zionist or ultra-orthodox—and hardly granted a significant place in his own story.³³ Even readers

Yet we note, with some impatient page-turning, that the history-laden passages are more “categories and catalogues” (Harshav, “Introduction,” p. xx) than a realistic, “novelistic,” evocation of place and time. The overdetermined rhetoric of Zionist and religious messianism is matched by the overstuffed catalogues of historical fact and the overcrowded gatherings of historical personages in Hebrew-speaking cafés.

33. In a contemporary review of the novel, Leah Goldberg described Kumer sympathetically as a “funnel” or “sieve” through which the characteristics of the generation flow. Quoted from *Mishmar* in Laor, p. 373.

Sentient Dogs, Liberated Rams, and Talking Asses

preoccupied by the challenge of a sentient dog and his connection with Isaac's hideous fate hardly hear Isaac's voice.

In trying to "redeem" Isaac in the interstices of his own story, we will not have recourse to the usual tricks of the trade, to the magic that would rescue the character from his penury, his mediocrity, or his melancholy. There is no magic in *Tmol shilshom*—unless you include sentient dogs (!) and the final rain that falls on a parched Jerusalem. That is, there *is* a miracle of sorts at the end, but still no magic. The text relentlessly eliminates all of its supernatural temptations. As Isaac walks through Jaffa, "the Lord of Imagination [*ba'al ha-dimyonot*] walks about with him."³⁴ But what that means, as Isaac will learn, painfully and repeatedly, is that he must become lord of his *own* imagination, because:

Miracles don't happen to every person, especially not to a fellow like Isaac, who isn't worth it to the Lord to do him a miracle even in a natural way . . . His heart became the home of thoughts for honest and naive people, like Reb Yudel Hasid his ancestor [protagonist of Agnon's *Hakhnasat kalah* (The Bridal Canopy)] and his three virgin daughters, who, when they were over their heads in troubles, the Lord summoned up for them a cave and they found a treasure. Isaac raised his head slightly and peeped into the cave and said, But here there is no treasure.³⁵

The universe in which Isaac lives, then, is disenchanted—and even if he ultimately consecrates the soil by his own death, it is hardly worth the price. The topos of the *akedah* will save neither the character nor the novel. Rather, as solutions to life and to literature are sought with utopian-messianic urgency, and ultimately absorbed into the governing myth, each character, Kumer in his turn, Balak in his (and the reader in hers), also moves through more compromised forms of novelistic—tragic or even comic—inquiry, negotiation, and hesitation.

The relation between magic, with its forms of enchantment or divination, and "truth" as sought, veiled, and revealed in the phenomenal world, is at the heart of the biblical subtext that I am invoking as hermeneutic key to the novel. To reread *Tmol shilshom* under the sign of *parashat balak* is to pay close attention to the realism in both texts. Symbolic negotiations with the real and the sacred take place in a disenchanted universe—a universe lived in the promise of revelation yet bound by the phenomenological. Balak's kingship over Moab is represented in one of the more naturalistic passages in the narrative of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness; it almost has the quality of historical or "novelistic" prose.³⁶ Even the exchange be-

34. I am using Harshav's translation even though *ba'al ha-dimyonot* can be translated, as it is elsewhere, as "man of imagination," as *ba'al* denotes ownership; the point however, is well taken in this passage, which contrasts divine and human agency.

35. *Only Yesterday*, p. 64; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 64.

36. Alter identifies "the general norm of historical and psychological realism that, despite the occasional intervention of divine agency or miraculous event, governs classical Hebrew narrative," as well as citing its exceptions in the Books of Esther, Daniel, Jonah, etc. ("Introduction to The Old Testament" in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987], p. 30).

tween human beings and the Deity is limited to privileged vessels and nighttime encounters. Magic is displaced in this context by the pagan soothsayer, Balaam, whose more truthful divination of the universe comes through his direct encounter with the God of Abraham (Who in turn, and with transparent stagecraft, manipulates all the characters, human, superhuman, and animal, to serve the divine purpose).³⁷ “For,” as Balaam proclaims once his eyes have been opened, “there is no divination in Yaakov,/and no augury in Israel;/at once it is said to Yaakov,/to Israel, what God intends.” [23:23–4]. Martin Buber interprets “at once” [*ka’et*] as “in time,” that is, in the real world, not through magic.³⁸ Embedded in the very title of Agnon’s novel is a similar marking of the human, temporal field as privileged site for extraordinary encounters.

Ostensibly, as we have already seen, Agnon’s novel proceeds through a dialectical language of internal contradictions and conflicting discourses, the struggle over the imagination generated by both the Zionist enterprise and an activist or anxious messianism (*ge’ulah nisit* or salvation by miracle).³⁹ Models of enchantment seem to serve mainly as reproach for the disenchanting, degraded state of the represented world. Read against an earlier Agnon narrative like *Bilvav yamim* [In the Heart of the Seas] (1934), what we might call the undeconstructed conciliatory “master narrative,”⁴⁰ in which the main character, Hananiah, makes his “ascent” to the Holy Land on a magic handkerchief while his fellow travelers must brave the perils of land and sea, *Tmol shilshom* enacts the challenges and traps of the totalizing and ultimately disempowering discourses of Zionism and messianism.

However, looking elsewhere for the novel’s real work leads us to the barely registered changes in Isaac as he becomes lord of his own imagination in the phenomenological world he learns to celebrate and to decorate, and it leads us to the shifting place of “imagination” or “fiction” as the site of both creative play and ethical action.

ISAAC UNBOUND: *HA-DOMEH LA-DOMEH*, OR FROM SIMILITUDE TO SIMILE

The evolution of a symbolic language—and of Isaac’s imagination as its laboratory—can be traced through those moments that are not dialectical, when perfect harmony is *not* a naïve flight of fancy deconstructed upon landing. Jerusalem, as both template of perfection and *mise-en-scène* for the imperfect human drama, is the primary site of a process of ongoing negotiations with the sacred and the symbolic. As the storyteller most associated with Jerusalem, Agnon may have been more tempted than any other modern Hebrew writer by the promise of proximity

37. Meir Sternberg considers Balaam’s talking ass a rare “violation of the Bible’s rule of naturalism,” her divinely-ordained speech an instance of “supernatural naturalism.” *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 174.

38. Translation and commentary by Everett Fox, p. 777; the reference is to Martin Buber’s *Moses* (New York: 1988).

39. *Only Yesterday*, pp. 8–9; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 12.

40. For a discussion of *Bilvav yamim* as “master narrative,” see my *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 81–102.

to sacred space, and by perfection and wholeness as its aesthetic correlates. Whereas he explored the seductions and dangers of such proximity over a lifetime of writing, they become explicit in this narrative as both psychological and aesthetic desiderata.

The “lesson” learned in Isaac’s first encounters with the land of his dreams is that wholeness exists only in distance and that proximity, the view from up close, is inevitably an act of dissection or deconstruction. Talking with his new “comrades,” the would be *ḥalutzim* who cannot find work in the agrarian villages, Isaac “learned what he hadn’t learned all the years, for all the years he had seen the new Land of Israel as one body [*ke-ḥativa aḥat*], and that night he learned that she too divided herself into many sections” [*she-af ḥi ‘asta et ‘atzma ḥativot ḥativot*- translation altered].⁴¹

Only in fleeting moments of proximity to the religious and the psychological matrices of his being—as when he recites the *Kaddish* for his *mother* at the *Wailing Wall*—will Isaac achieve the unity or wholeness that is otherwise just out of reach. After he has recited the *kaddish*, stones and worshippers congeal in his vision into oneness before God (*ḥativa aḥat lifnei ha-makom*)—the oneness with Place that is the ultimate form of placement.⁴² This is a messianic foreshadowing that can only be glimpsed as it fades. Isaac’s more pragmatic lesson is that it is through veiling or other forms of mediated encounter that proximity to place is enacted in a broken world.

That is, beneath the discursive structure of the deconstructed whole is another paradigm for encountering and representing the world: the struggle for an approach to the holy resolved through the distance preserved in acts of proxy, mediation, or substitution. After a long journey through different imaginative realms and before his terrible end, Isaac himself will emerge as one of Agnon’s greatest acts of substitution.

Isaac’s imagination evolves as a slow exploration of the symbolic universe. In the first place, his father sends him to the Holy Land to see for himself that the Zionist vision of the Land of Israel is a “fiction the Zionists made up” [*she-kol ‘inyan eretz yisrael davar badui hu*].⁴³ But, as it turns out, it’s not just the Zionist fiction—which is, after all, for Herzl’s followers, the fiction to end all fictions (*‘ein zu aggadah*)⁴⁴—but Agnon’s own fictions that must also be tested, especially *Hakhnasat kalah* and *Bilvav yamim*, whose protagonists, as we have seen, are under a divine protectorate. Isaac has to be reminded often that, even if he is a descendant of R. Yudel Ḥasid, he is not living in an enchanted world and he has to work much harder than his predecessors and even to engage in subterfuge—not only to survive himself but to help others survive. This, too, is defined as a leap of imagination in what we come to understand as an evolving aesthetic and moral faculty. Isaac’s early acts of kindness are coded as acts of “fiction.” When he furnishes

41. *Only Yesterday*, p. 54; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 55.

42. *Only Yesterday*, p. 369; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 351.

43. *Only Yesterday*, p. 5; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 9.

44. Herzl of course never spoke those words in Hebrew; “wenn ihr volt, Ist es kein Märchen,” the motto of his utopian novel, *Altneuland* (1902), became the Hebrew slogan of political Zionism sometime later. On this, see my *Booking Passage*, pp. 3 ff.

food for the indigent and ill, the families of his ailing patron, the painter Samson Bloykoff, and later of Reb Fayish, the paralyzed father of his beloved Shifra, Isaac invents stories to deceive the wives and daughters of these disabled men into thinking that he received the food as a favor or as recompense for his labor. This work is accomplished through “similitudes” or similes of similes [*ha-domeh la-domeh*].⁴⁵ What is crucial here is that this act of imagination produces a form of similitude that has nothing of resemblance in it; only substitution. If, as Paul Ricoeur argues, the “pact between substitution and resemblance” in metaphor is axiomatic in the long history of rhetoric,⁴⁶ in this narrative there are moments of dissociation. R. Fayish, the ritual slaughterer, is the one who supplies real fish and meat; when he falls ill, Isaac can provide only ersatz: bread and eggs—and even those require acts of inventiveness. But if his “pocket is small, his imagination is big. Every day he makes up something, just so Shifra and her mother won’t lack food” [*Yitzhak eyno yage’a milivdot kol yom devarim hadashim*].⁴⁷ His imagination has gone from a myopic view at a distance to a microscopic focus on the quotidian, domestic—until the distance between lens and object all but disappears.

The remaining fictions belong, then, to the realm of the human: mortal, vulnerable, and flawed. Isaac’s soul finds equilibrium when he reaches a level of consciousness that can support his life without magical thinking, or a level of happiness that needs little or no rhetorical projection. Sitting in the home of a woodcarver in Jerusalem who engraves miniature friezes of the Temple and holy shrines on ritual objects, Isaac revels in the presence of children and family warmth for the first time since leaving his hometown, and his delight in his present surroundings merges with his longing for his own siblings. He asks himself, “Am I really in Jerusalem? And in his mind’s eye emerges a host of early visions he had envisioned when he was in Diaspora. And two loves, the love of Jerusalem in the vision and the love of Jerusalem in reality, *come and mate and give birth to a new love, which has some of the former and some of the latter*.”⁴⁸ The original language of longing that was composed of the “alien discourse” of verses and quotations, of formulaic poetic hyperbole, has given way to the conjugation of vision and reality in the rhetoric of consummated love. For Isaac does eventually achieve fulfillment—a lucrative job, a comfortable family environment in which to live and work, and finally, the hand of Shifra, the pious Jerusalemite he has allowed himself to love. It is only *then* that he is bitten by the (now-rabid) dog, Balak.

Isaac can engage in such mating or matchmaking of what is near and far, such *shaatnez* or amalgamation of incompatible realms because he is, after all, not a *real* painter, like Samson Bloykoff; he is just a housepainter, a decorator, a “smeared” [*lakhlekhan*]—closer in many ways to craftsmen such as the woodcarver or Yohanan Lightfoot (nicknamed Sweetfoot).⁴⁹ He is not one of Agnon’s

45. *Only Yesterday*, p. 338; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 322.

46. Ricoeur, p. 27.

47. *Only Yesterday*, p. 338; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 322.

48. *Only Yesterday*, p. 557; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 527. Emphasis mine.

49. Yohanan Lightfoot’s father was a painter of Russian Orthodox icons, and he himself is a master “craftsman.” [E 72–77; H 71–77]. See Adi Tzemach, who argues that the true artist or craftsman (*uman*) in *Tmol shilshom* is Lightfoot—“*ha-regel ha-metukah*” or Sweetfoot—a character who,

great artists, like Ben Uri (“*Agunot*”) or Raphael (“*Aggadat ha-sofer*” [“Tale of a Scribe”]), so absorbed in their art that they take leave of the human sphere and the human love available to them in order to merge with their creation; he is not one of the great “*metaknim*” or repairmen, like Ḥananiah in *Bilvav yamim*, or the rabbi in “*Agunot*” (who, in fact, deserts his own wife in order to liberate other deserted wives). Isaac is the perfectly (or perfectly) average man—the perfect subject for the novel Agnon would write—if “only” he could live at peace within the precincts of the modern novel.⁵⁰

That is just the point. Agnon *has* written that novel, but it is so deeply embedded in the other one as to be all but invisible. Isaac’s craft is the exact reflection in the material, visual world of the work of his soul—as the language of equanimity is its rhetorical reflection. Isaac’s approach to the sphere of holiness is always mediated—by his own humility and by the very nature of his vocation, just as his approach to the inner sanctum of true artistic activity is mediated by other, “truer,” painters.

A “state of equanimity” [*midat ha-hishtavut*], the perfect balance or “mat- ing” of expectation and reality, desire and the world, borrowed from the ḥasidic lexicon,⁵¹ will become, in the course of Isaac’s narrative, the dam holding back the waters of literalism. Here it is *not substitution but resemblance* that constitutes the metaphoric act. It is, Ricoeur reminds us, the explicit display of the “moment of resemblance that operates implicitly in metaphor. The poet, as we read in the *Po- etics*, is one who ‘perceives similarity.’”⁵² In this case, similarity is so intense as to approximate a kind of identity or equation. “Milk and honey Isaac did not find in Jerusalem, but he did attain a state of equanimity [*midat ha-hishtavut*].” Thus concludes chapter 5 of Book Two.⁵³ The milk and honey of impossible utopian dreams and alien discourse will be substituted by something more humble in the opening of the next chapter: Isaac, who has become a respected craftsman in Jerusalem, walks with a heavy gait, “*like a craftsman* whose pace is weighed down

like Isaac, achieves “*midat ha-hishtavut*,” the equanimity and fullness that are reserved for the pious ḥasid or tzaddik (see below). “Ha-regel ha-metukah: mikra be-*Tmol shilshom*” [Sweetfoot: a reading of *Tmol shilshom*] in Adi Tzemach, *Kri’ah tamah: ‘Iyyunim be-sifrut ‘ivrit* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz hameuhad, 1990), pp. 25–39 (originally published in *Ha’areztz*, 1963); and “Ba-‘avur na’alayim” [For the sake of shoes] in *Kri’ah tamah*, pp. 62–70.

50. Miron argues that Agnon’s “transactions with the novel” were never fully resolved. “Like all who attempt *tikkun* or religious reformation of the world, [Agnon] put himself in the heart of the danger, where he was most apt to be hurt,” claims Miron. What that meant was that he could only go so far in realizing the form of the modern novel: “Accepting the wholeness offered by eros and poetry” as “possible fulfillment” for “*l’homme moyen sensual*,” who appears in later novels like *Guest for the Night*, *Only Yesterday*, and *Shira*, would have meant a kind of “exile” from the “personal spiritual source of Agnon’s life and art.” From “Domesticating a Foreign Genre: Agnon’s Transactions with the Novel,” in *Prooftexts*, Vol. 7, no. 1, Jan. 1987, pp. 19, 25–26.

51. On “*midat ha-hishtavut*” in Ḥasidic texts, see Raḥel Elijor, *Harut ‘al ha-luhot: ha-maḥshava ha-ḥasidit, mekoroteha ha-misti’im ve-yesodoteha ha-kabali’im* [Incised in the Tablets] (Tel Aviv: Misrad ha-bitahon, 1999), pp. 150–164., esp. the discussion of the *tzaddik* in his mediation between the material and the spiritual worlds, pp. 162–163.

52. Ricoeur, p. 27.

53. *Only Yesterday*, p. 230, *Tmol shilshom* p. 223.

by his tools.”⁵⁴ Somehow, even the pretense of a simile, however superfluous in those rare moments of religious revelation or emotional bliss, will be enough to signify the very act of signification.

What calls attention to itself as a redundant or “pseudo”-simile, in which signified and signifier are identical, a perfect alignment between the world represented and the language of representation, will later turn out to be a critical placeholder for the very human act of metaphor-making. What will keep saving the narrative from great rhetorical flourishes is, as we shall see, exactly what will save Isaac from unmediated proximity to the sacred.

Isaac’s first entry into Jerusalem is heralded portentously by a “still, small voice” [*kol demama daka*] blowing through the mountains and filling his heart with sadness; the voice blends with the wordless melody [*niggun*] of the carter and produces the equilibrium that is represented through the pseudo-simile: “Isaac looked before him and his heart began pounding, *as a man’s heart pounds when he approaches the place of his desire.*”⁵⁵ Then his consciousness moves into the visual field, in what could be considered his own unselfconscious *ars poetica*, magnificent in its understatement:

Because he was somewhat consoled by the voice of the old man [the carter] sitting and singing melodies of prayer, he removed the gloom from his heart. Before him, the wall of Jerusalem suddenly appeared, woven into a red fire, plaited with gold, surrounded by gray clouds blended with blue clouds, which incise and engrave it with shapes of spun gold, choice silver, burnished brass, and purple tin. Isaac rose up and wanted to say something. But his tongue was hushed in his mouth as in a mute song. He sat down as if carried away by a sitting dance.⁵⁶

The wall of Jerusalem and the surrounding clouds are a great tapestry of colorful threads “incising and engraving” [*hortzin ve-hortin*] shapes that only hint at figuration. Alluding to the colors and textures of the Temple vestments, they remain undefined, color with only an intimation of form. Isaac’s canvas will always be color without form and Isaac’s song will always be mute.

The next time he approaches the site of holiness, it is also with color and also with muted speech. This time he is realizing his vision: painting what he saw in his first glimpse of the holy city, using the materials of his trade—his paints and brushes. Isaac’s reputation as housepainter has reached the foreign consuls and gone as far as the Pasha himself—who invites the Jewish craftsman to repair “their” house of worship on “our” Temple Mount. “Isaac may have been the only one to enter the Holy of Holies and to practice his craft in the place of our Temple . . . *Too bad* our comrade Isaac isn’t much of a storyteller and can’t tell what his eyes saw there.”⁵⁷

Too bad? This slight passage, like the earlier entry to Jerusalem camouflaged in a noisy, satiric chapter, underscores the ethics of the non-literal, the unarticu-

54. *Only Yesterday*, p. 230, *Tmol shilshom*, p. 223. Emphasis mine.

55. *Only Yesterday*, pp. 195–196; *Tmol shilshom*, pp. 189–190. Emphasis mine.

56. *Only Yesterday*, p. 196; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 190.

57. *Only Yesterday*, pp. 227–228; *Tmol shilshom*, pp. 219–220. Emphasis mine.

lated, the mediated, a truth brought back to the sites of holiness from two thousand years of negotiating distance: Neither shape nor word can give form to the experience of proximity to holiness without endangering the life or the sanity of the pilgrim. Particularly in light of the resonances of the *ʿakedah* in this passage,⁵⁸ the alternative to the dominant model is one of distance, muteness and mediation.

As painter of walls, then, Isaac preserves his distance from iconographic temptations. We shall see that even the greatest artist in this narrative, Samson Bloykoff, paints “behind a veil.” But Isaac is also a sign-painter, and as such he will eventually succumb to the seduction of letters. Ostensibly less dangerous than graven images, letters can be lethal when subjected to certain iconic readings. It is not as “smearer” but as sign-maker that Isaac paints “crazy dog” [*kelev meshugaʿ*] on Balak’s back and enters into the dangerous “kabbalistic” place that will eventually in his own death.

SIGNING VS. SMEARING: MESSIANIC REPRESENTATIONS

Words that lose their symbolic status precipitate the downfall of the two main characters in *Tmol shilshom*, as the encounter between them produces a text that runs wild. Balak becomes what Anne Golomb Hoffman calls “a wandering text . . . a writing cut loose, ‘demonic’ in its randomness.”⁵⁹ But after his fateful encounter with Isaac, Balak becomes a “readerly” text⁶⁰ in two very different senses: the dog as conscious being is *read* by the reader even while, as sign, he is *misread* by the novel’s inhabitants. It is a little-noted fact that Balak’s consciousness is shared (“overheard”) by only two others: the narrator and the reader. For all intents and purposes, everyone else, including Isaac, regards him as a mangy stray dog. When the center of consciousness moves from Isaac to Balak, the dog appears as a sentient but not talking animal, who therefore does not really disturb the realistic texture of the novel for any of its characters. Unlike an animal in a fable dressed in human clothes and interacting with other characters in human language, or, for that matter, Balaam’s talking ass, Balak remains in all his behaviors fully canine. (The only external concession to his human consciousness is the frequent reference to his bark as a “shout.”⁶¹)

What *has* been noted by most readers, especially those who pay particular

58. The resonances of the *ʿakedah* are quite salient in the Hebrew: “[*ha-faḥa*] . . . *shalah lahem et ḥavereinu, et yitzhak, ve-efshar she-yitzhak yeḥid haya bedavar ze . . .*”. According to tradition, *ʿakedat yitzhak* took place on the very site of the Temple mount. I am grateful to my colleague Galit Hasan-Rokem for pointing out the resonances of the *ʿakedah* in this passage.

59. Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), p. 129.

60. It is the twin act of reading and interpretation that constitutes Balak’s being-in-the-world. Although I am invoking the term more loosely than Roland Barthes did in his path-breaking study of cultural codes as determinative of “readerly” texts, to the extent that the (mis)readers of Balak are “consumers” of the dog-as-text, applying familiar codes to decipher the letters on his back, their act conforms to the “readerly” posture that Barthes defines. It is, therefore, only in the *re-reading* that we can capture the “play which is the return of the different.” *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 3–16.

61. *Only Yesterday*, p. 289; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 278—and *passim*.

attention to the modernist aspects of *Tmol shilshom*, is the extent to which Balak is toxic *only* as text. The branded dog, writes Hoffman, “wanders around Jerusalem in search of a reader, who can decode for it the mysterious inscription on its back.”⁶² Balak’s own fate, and Isaac’s, depend entirely on the reception of that inscription. If people *really* understood the nature of signs, that they are human in origin, *or* if they grappled with the imputed power of the word in “proper” or improper combinations in mystical traditions, they would take care not to confuse signifiers for the Real Thing, and would not treat a marked dog as if he were really mad, thus driving him mad and turning a semiotic mark into a self-fulfilling prophecy. His *craziness* is his newly-branded status as social outcast; his rabid *madness* is the outcome of systematic misreading. Misrepresentation, the sin of Isaac’s mislabeling the dog, is compounded, then, by a literal-mindedness that is the most pernicious form of misreading.

Reb Fayesh, Shifra’s father, is exemplar of those literalists who believe their earthly acts will hasten the coming of the Redeemer:

Reb Fayesh [the ritual slaughterer] could have enjoyed his life and filled his belly with meat, but he was fonder of a tiny bit of Wild Ox in the World-to-Come than of all the living animals and birds in This World, and was rigorous about disqualifying meat as unfit even in cases when most legal rabbinical opinions would have permitted it.⁶³

Because he lives in a state of messianic anxiety, Reb Fayish can find—and give—no comfort in this world. It is only when he has been neutralized, paralyzed by his own encounter with Balak, that his literal-mindedness ceases to interfere with Isaac’s chances for fulfillment as artist and lover.

Messianic Judaism, however, has another mode: the tale of satisfied human desire living in the promise of final redemption in God’s good time. This is messianic Judaism in its deferred, comic mode.⁶⁴ It is not sentimental or utopian. It recognizes the comic inherent in the tragic or mythic vision, even in the *‘akedah* itself, under the sign of substitution and mediation. Read as aborted tragedy, the biblical *‘akedah* is framed by benevolent intercession: *Deus ex machina* appears from the very beginning to announce to the reader what the key actors do not know, that this is (only) a test; and, finally, the substitution of the ram creates a Happy End (well, not so happy for the ram, but that is another story). As has been pointed out by Shalom Spiegel and elaborated by others, this is the ethical and religious message of the biblical story—though not of its legacy. Spiegel cites the passage from Pesikta R. 40, in which even the very site of the *‘akedah*, Mount Moriah itself, is etymologically altered to read as “*Temurah*,” or exchange; substitution.⁶⁵

62. Hoffman, p. 128.

63. *Only Yesterday*, p. 331; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 315.

64. On Jewish messianism in its comic mode, and the distinction between deferred and “anxious” messianism, see my “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?” in *Yale Journal of Criticism*, Spring, 2001, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 287–313. Also see Amos Oz’s definition of “true messianism” as belonging “to the grammatical and emotional sphere of the future.” *The Silence of Heaven*, p. 102.

65. Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to*

Sentient Dogs, Liberated Rams, and Talking Asses

An intimation of the difference between “anxious” messianism in its sentimental-utopian-mythic form and deferred messianism in its novelistic-comic form is given on the last page of *Tmol shilshom*. Perhaps to rescue a work that has been disfigured by its hideous conclusion, the narrator gives us a glimpse of redemption and promises us that *someday* a final chapter will be written about Isaac’s comrades, in a volume to be called “A Parcel of Land”—*sefer ḥelkat ha-sadeh*⁶⁶:

Finally the rains stopped and the clouds dispersed and the sun shone. And when we came outside we saw that the earth was smiling with its plants and its flowers. And from one end of the Land to the other came shepherds and their flocks . . . and a great rejoicing was in the world . . . All the villages in Judea and the Galilee, in the plain and in the mountains produced crops and the whole land was like a Garden of the Lord . . . And every bush and every blade of grass emitted a good smell, *and needless to say, so did the oranges* . . . And you our brothers, the elite of our salvation in Kinneret and Merhavia, in Eyn Ganim and in *Um Juni, which is now Degania*, you went out to your work in the fields and the gardens, the work our comrade Isaac wasn’t blessed with. Our comrade Isaac wasn’t blessed to stand on the ground and plow and sow, but like his ancestor Reb Yudel Hasid . . . he was blessed to be given an estate of a grave in the holy earth.

Completed are the deeds of Isaac
The deeds of our other comrades
The men and the women
Will come in the book *A Parcel of Land*.⁶⁷

The inflated rhetoric of the final paragraph suggests that the promised sequel will pick up where Isaac’s story went astray (around page 2?). This is reinforced in the so-called ‘Epilogue’ to the novel, in which Isaac’s widow Shifra, who, it is now revealed, has become pregnant during their honeymoon[!] bears a daughter; that daughter, in turn, marries the son of Isaac’s first love, Sonia, and provides issue and closure if not exactly a happy conclusion to Isaac’s unfortunate story. Published in *Moznayim* in 1971, the epilogue was (of course) never incorporated into the text itself. When “our” narrator returns to his “original” plan for the story, he falls back into the bombast of urgent utopian-messianic rhetoric and sentimental resolutions—which are as peremptory as the *‘akedah* and which can only be punctured by the satiric fragrance of hyperbolic oranges. *In such a plot, Um Juni is as effaced as Isaac*. The *other* plot, the comic plot of deferred messianism and life

Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Aqedah, tr. by Judah Goldin (New York: Pantheon, 1967), p. 69. What Spiegel calls the “proxy offering” becomes the (unheeded) lesson of the *‘akedah*. Ibid. In her extensive consideration of the *‘akedah* in modern Hebrew poetry, Ruth Kartun-Blum translates “hamara” as “transformation” rather than substitution. *Profane Scriptures: Reflections on the Dialogue with the Bible in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999), p. 21. On the subject of sacrifice as substitution, see also René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

66. *Only Yesterday*, p. 641; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 607.

67. *Only Yesterday*, p. 642; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 607. Emphasis mine.

and art at a distance from the promise and the sacred, is never granted official status—but remains buried just below the surface of a “parcel of land.”

From the perspective of the deferred promise, and of Isaac’s story before the fatal dog bite, in the meantime between beginnings and endings, in that narrow space between the picture of perfection and its deconstruction, the narrow space that the literal-minded utopianists and the narrator himself have left Isaac (and the inhabitants of Um Juni), there is very little wiggle room. What prevails there is desire, the erotic, the joy in storytelling, in making olive wood facsimiles of the Temple in the home of the woodcarver and in painting shapeless color on walls and signs to be read as symbols and place-savers; in using our imagination to feed the hungry and read to the blind and comfort the sick and find a place for human love. But as an agenda for the novel, the problem, articulated repeatedly by the narrator, remains one of sheer interest: how to engage the reader in Isaac, who, as he stumbles through life, is reported to be less than fascinating to his friends and neighbors—and by extension, to us. Even as evidence to the contrary piles up, as people like Bloykoff and Sweet Foot and Moshe Amram, Shifra’s grandfather, do take to Isaac and as his imagination develops in quiet but riveting ways, we are repeatedly admonished by the narrator that he is not really a subject of interest. The real work of the novel must proceed, then, somewhat independent of the narrator’s authority; meanwhile, the narrative interest shifts to Balak.

In trying to maintain the connection between the two distinct centers of consciousness, most readers view Balak as somehow a commentary or a projection, if not the alter-ego, of Isaac.⁶⁸ Dan Miron’s compelling reading of the entire novel through the model of Goethe’s *Faust*, and of Balak through the Mephistophelean canine, views him as more integral to the structure of the novel.⁶⁹ Others, like Nitza Ben Dov, mischievously suggest that the whole dog section may be Agnon’s sly way of throwing his critics a bone.⁷⁰ Trying to steer clear of what has become a dog-eat-dog world of critical claims and counterclaims, I prefer to view the appearance of this sentient animal as a shift in the narrative’s focus of attention at the point when Isaac’s life and imagination have found resolution, leading us into the recesses of place and mind that Isaac could not or need not enter.

68. See among others, Arnold Band, “Ha-ḥet ve-onsho be-*Tmol shilshom*,” p. 77; Boaz Arpali, *Rav-roman*, p. 16. See also Meshulam Tuchner, who argues that Balak is Isaac’s suffering alter-ego. *Pesher Agnon* [Interpreting Agnon] (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1968). Eli Schweid claims that the dog is not an “animal reflection” of the man, but, rather, Isaac is “a human reflection of the dog.” “Kelev ḥutzot—ve-adam: ‘iyyun be-*Tmol shilshom* le-shai agnon,” [Stray Dog—and a Man: Studies in *Tmol Shilshom*], *Molad*, December-January, 1958, p. 387.

69. At times Miron refers to *Faust* as ‘model’ and at times as ‘analogue.’ In any case, he claims that whereas parallels to other texts are specific and sporadic [*nekudati*], *Faust* is structurally integral [*tavniti*] to the novel. “Bein shte neshamot,” pp. 560, 574.

70. “*O im balak ayno ela netakh basar na’ she-zarak agnon le-mevakrav she-yevashluhu kakh she-yararev le-ḥikam ve-yishtalev ‘im hashkafat ‘olamam*”—Ben Dov, p. 378. She is chastised by Miron for implying such a thing. As stated before, I tend to agree with her and her predecessors, Dov Sadan in Agnon’s generation and Avraham Holtz in ours, that all the symbolic constructs are open-ended, all interpretations tentative—“*lefi sha’ah*”—and reflect the interpreter’s own struggle.

Sentient Dogs, Liberated Rams, and Talking Asses

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC: CRAZY DOGS, LIBERATED RAMS

What are those places? The dog whose initial appearance as a sentient being is patently artificial evolves into a “crazy” and then into a mad dog, galvanizing the most destructive forces that have informed the narrative from the beginning. So at this point we, too, might stop and ask the question that troubles every reader: Why a *crazy* dog? Why such extraordinary intervention in the life of such an ordinary man? Why the last minute sabotage of a happy end? The narrator, Isaac’s first “reader,” framed the question for every subsequent reader: “This Isaac who is no worse than any other person, why is he punished so harshly? Is it because he teased a dog? He meant it only as a joke. Moreover, *the end of Isaac Kumer is not inherent in his beginning.*”⁷¹

Why is Isaac not saved like his ancestor, Yudel, or his prototype, Ḥananiah? Especially since it would require much less effort? Why does his creator rather expend such effort and artifice to “redeem” him from the tedium of a Happy End and to displace the human comedy with a modern theodicy? If the end of Isaac Kumer is *not* inherent in his beginning, are we to reconstruct the story from its end? And the dog—whose supernatural appearance gives way as he moves through the spaces of the city and the narrative to a “novelistic” interrogation of the cosmos and of human society, as his self-consciousness becomes the fictive instrument for “finding things out,” potentially a receptacle of either tragic or comic possibility—why is he reduced at the end to the instrument of peremptory myth? If, as many insist, the destruction of European Jewish civilization informs the merciless conclusion, does Agnon give us the option of a kinder reading for kinder times?⁷² Or, if not kinder times, times in which moral agency is urgently required in response to truth claims made in the name of implacable deities?

The irony is that “our” Isaac almost doesn’t make it to his own sacrifice. Like Abraham in Kafka’s vision, who was too busy putting his house in order to perform the sacrifice, our comrade Isaac was too busy being happy to hear the call. Of course, once he is dragged to the altar and bound with ropes, neither he nor we can overlook the theme of the *ʿakedah* already embedded in his name. But then let us remember that a subtle negotiation with the biblical prototype, and with the *ʿakedah* in its comic form, has been going on throughout the narrative: Isaac is already the “bound” one—or, rather, the “unbound,” the “survivor”—the one who

71. *Only Yesterday*, p. 639; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 604. Emphasis mine. Miron puts this as the most crucial question in the novel. “Bein shtei neshamot,” p. 592. See also Arpali, who is one of the few who acknowledge that the narrative, read as a string of contingencies without its terrible and unpredictable conclusion, could be emplotted as comedy. *Rav roman*, p. 11.

72. Miron’s most recent reading of the novel claims that the bipartite structure of the narrative is inherent to Agnon’s vision, exposing the schism within the Jewish soul and its disastrous consequences—with only eschatological reference to a possible resolution, a “tragic redemption beyond the historical horizon of the novel” [*geula tragic . . . me-ʿever la-ofek ha-histori shel ha-roman*] (“Bein shtei neshamot,” pp. 597–599). I think Miron’s ‘tragic’ vision is not far from the ‘comic’ reading I am proposing, with its potential affinities to the deferred messianism of Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, for whom history’s ruins are the sign of an inevitable redemption, in kinder times, beyond our historical horizon.

is accustomed to substitutes because, like his namesake for whom the ram was substituted, all of Isaac Kumer's actions are surrogates for some other, original, plan. His dream of becoming a *ḥalutz* and living in the farming settlements outside Jaffa is exchanged for house- and sign-painting in Jerusalem; his secular behaviors for religious praxis; Sonia for Shifra. Like his craft and his location in physical and emotional space, his very life remains—*until its horrible end*—under the sign of substitution. As each utopia yields to its default mode, his presence in the world acquires a different, more material, substance and his soul finds equilibrium. The Sacrifice of Isaac is an abrupt, intrusive act of closure to a story that, unremarkable as it is, could simply go on and on.

PARASHAT BALAK: TALKING ASSES AND THE ETHICS OF IMAGINATION

Sheḥitat Yitzḥak, the murder of Isaac, which is *ʿakedat yitzḥak* in its rawest, most unworked form, imposes itself on *Tmol shilshom* only at the end—but it is an end that acts like a magnet to draw to it all the scattered metonymic elements that might have been overlooked in the aggregative process of a first reading, offering resolution to all the riddles in the text. By way of—or in place of—conclusion, I want to offer, once again as alternative hermeneutic, the application of *parashat balak* as the humble, enigmatic subtext that gathers momentum as it goes and is only dashed at the end by the force of the more powerful magnet.

I have been arguing all along that once we let that other text in, it becomes no less compelling as hermeneutic code or structural pattern than, say, *Faust* is compelling in Miron's reading. The difference is that it is compelling not as a model or analogue but as an epistemological stance. It works, I think, on the earlier biblical text as powerfully as on the modern Hebrew novel.

We have seen that, under the sign of substitution and mediation, the uninflected narrative of the *ʿakedah* is an aborted tragedy; under the sign of "*parashat balak*" it shifts even further into comedy. If we look again at Genesis 22 in light of Numbers 22–24, the resonances of the first in the second become so salient as to suggest that *parashat balak* could be read as a comic rewrite of *ʿakedah yitzḥak*—or, more radically, as a vindication through "history" of the *ʿakedah as comedy*. Factor in the alacrity with which Balaam, like Abraham, rises the morning after his nighttime encounter with a heavenly voice, the presence of donkeys in both narratives (although only one is a chatterbox), the presence of two young men who see nothing, hear nothing, and say nothing, the appearance of angels or divine messengers who save the main character, and of course, the curse that becomes a blessing. So close to some inclusive version of Jewish theodicy is Balaam's voice in that divinely-inspired moment that in a Talmudic discussion of the "canon" and authorial responsibility, Moses is said to have written "his own" book and "*parashat Balaam*" (sic) [*Baba batra* 14b-15a].⁷³ But Balaam's story also represents the playful

73. Generally speaking, given his later, cameo reappearance in Num. 31, traditional sources treat Balaam ambivalently, casting him as both one of the great prophets and as inimical and scheming. See Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 130–138, 148–149.

or carnivalesque potential in biblical narrative,⁷⁴ and following the Balak trail leads us to yet another text that reinforces the comic, or the messianic in its comic mode: the Book of Ruth.

In talmudic genealogy, Ruth the Moabite is Balak's granddaughter (*Sanhedrin* 72b)—and, in turn, the progenitor of Messiah son of David. Her book, in its pastoral form and its genealogical elaboration, helps to articulate the birth of a non-apocalyptic messianism. Scattered throughout the book of Ruth, like crumbs waiting for Hansel and Gretel, like the leviathan waiting from the seven days of creation to swallow Jonah—or like pieces of meat thrown to us critics—are phrases that will take on nominative status in Agnon's narrative. *Megillat Ruth* contains both the name of the book that Agnon actually wrote (*Tmol shilshom* as adverbial phrase: “just yesterday,” or “habitually”—2:11) and the book he promised to write: *helkat ha-sadeh*, or “a parcel of land” (2:3; 4:3). The Book of *Ruth* inhabits the comic side of the biblical imagination as genre and the comic side of the Talmudic imagination as annunciation.

Connecting the dots, so to speak, between the *ʿakedah*, *parashat balak*, *Ruth*, and *Tmol shilshom* is an exercise in highlighting the comic impulse in Hebrew letters—but the onus is on the reader. Read as comic counternarratives to the apocalyptic claims of the Hebrew imagination, the stories of Balaam and Ruth license a more “novelistic” reading of Agnon's text, relieving it of some of its mythic pressures. By the same token, *hesitation* or undecidability along with an appreciation for stagecraft is the hermeneutic response to extraordinary events that challenge the norms of the narrative. The mystery of Balaam's story is in the surface realism that has not, apparently, been ruffled. The supernatural appearance of an angel in that narrative (or “messenger,” as he appears in some translations⁷⁵) is so intrusive in an otherwise realistic story that it is revealed only to the ass—and the reader. But fantasy is heightened when the ass opens her mouth: The appearance of a *talking* ass is so disruptive of the texture of the narrative that scholars assume it to be an interpolation from folkloristic sources.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, even after the animal begins speaking—at which Balaam registers no particular surprise—and, finally, even after the blinders have been removed from the diviner's eyes so that he can see what the ass saw, none of the others in his entourage seem to have noticed anything out of the ordinary, neither talking animal nor divine messenger.

The biblical text supports what theorists from Jean-Paul Sartre through Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson have defined as the “fantastic”: that liminal site where cosmic and social truths are challenged through the enigmatic

74. It is the texture of the narrative and not the person of Balaam that concerns us here. The Balaam/Balak trail also leads us to the Zohar, where connections between Balaam and the canine theme become clear. See Hillel Barzel, “Diukano shel kelev: ‘iyyun mashveh: ‘kelev hutzot’ mi-tokh *Tmol shilshom* le-shai agnon u-mehkarav shel kelev lefi kafka” [Profile of a Dog: Comparative study of Agnon and Kafka], *Karmelit*, vol. 14, no. 15, pp. 161–173.

75. “Now the she-ass saw YHWH's messenger/ stationed in the way . . .” Everett Fox, Num. 22:23, p. 771.

76. “In [Num.] 22:21–35 the redactor has included the folktale of Balaam's talking ass . . .” James S. Ackerman, “Numbers” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, p. 86.

presence of the unreal. What remains crucial to this genre is the response of the reader:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know . . . there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us . . . The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.

. . . The reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations.⁷⁷

The invitation to read Balak through *parashat balak* is, I submit, what allows for an Agnonistic hesitation not only between the real and the marvelous but also between the reality of the twentieth century—and realism as its language of representation—and a worldview that is archaic but still accessible. The fact that the biblical story combines elements of realism, sorcery or magic, human imagination, and divination as well as divine providence authorizes an audaciously enigmatic form of modernism. Not quite magical realism, the fantastic is also manifest in *Tmol shilshom* in its most distilled form, since, as we have already noted, it is “experienced” only by the reader. Nothing, that is, challenges the premises of realism from the point of view of the residents of this novel—so that a kind of hesitation remains regarding the ontological status of the sentient dog. There is just enough uncertainty about the appearance of the supernatural to create an uneasy dialectic between the epistemology of realism and of enchantment: Is the sentient dog, like the she-ass with x-ray vision, “real,” then—or only a projection of the (character’s? narrator’s? reader’s?) imagination? This is the central epistemological question of *parashat balak*, in its ancient and its modern forms.

The struggle between “truth” and its veiled forms of representation is the core of the biblical drama that drives my reading of *Tmol shilshom* and the privileging of texture over plot, of journey over telos. The crucial difference between the biblical and the modern text lies, of course, in the ultimate resolution of uncertainty at the narrative level. In both *Tmol shilshom* and *parashat balak* the animal is the purveyor of truth—first in its metaphoric and then in its material manifestation—and the appearance of animals as both figures of speech and speechifying figures

77. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 25, 33. For both a survey on the vast critical literature on this subject and her own compelling theory, see Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981).

is the most salient poetic interruption of the surface realism.⁷⁸ But in the biblical world, where divine revelation is always the most likely resolution to any ontological conundrum, the she-ass *knows* the truth—and, eventually, so does Balaam. In the world from which revelation has been withdrawn and knowledge is always speculative, the animal, like all mortals, is still searching—even though (especially because) the “truth” that he seeks is inscribed on his back—and the reader is still hesitating.

Ariel Hirschfeld comes close to a reading that would privilege the “fantastic,” but he resolves the doubt inherent in the fantastic in favor of the more peremptory mode of the grotesque. The narrative’s entry into an improbable world takes place, in this reading, not in the dog’s “human” consciousness, but in the two-tiered act of writing on the dog’s back: first the senseless, redundant act of painting “dog” on a dog, and then the act in which the human faculty (metonymized as Isaac’s “arm”) imposes a poetic, metaphoric, perception on the phenomenological world by adding the word “crazy.” Because of the haphazard way in which this double act of signification is accomplished, and its dire consequences, the final mythic structure is offered not as explanation but as bitter irony.⁷⁹

Writing “dog” on a dog is, as most critics have been quick to note, the ultimate challenge to all forms of signing. But in terms of the symbolic procedures I have been tracing, it appears, at first, to signify the world through an act of equivalence or equilibrium, having the same effect as the “pseudo-simile”—comparing the craftsman Isaac to a craftsman. But consider this: What is missing in this one act of Isaac’s and later in the dog’s response is precisely that self-conscious ges-

78. Animals serve in *parashat balak* in both metaphoric and anthropomorphic forms. The biblical story begins with a prefiguration of the animal as image and as character: “Moav” says to the “elders of Midyan: look now, this assembly will lick up everything around us *like an ox* licks up the green-things of the field!” [Num. 22:4-tr. Fox, p. 769]. Later, after the she-ass appears in her personified state, Balaam takes up his “parable” and describes the people of Israel “*like the horns of the wild-ox*,” “*like a king of beasts, like a lion*” [Num.23:24]. The prefiguration of Agnon’s *Balak*, in emblem and metaphor, from his first appearance as a figure on Sonia’s bedspread, has been traced by many careful readers.

79. Hirschfeld’s definition of the “grotesque” is of an invasive force, the imposition of human consciousness on a series of random events or phenomena and, in turn, the repercussions of such an imposition for human fate. Rather than overriding the act of symbol-making, through, say, reverting to the grand mythic scheme of the *‘akedah*, the “tragic catastrophe [at the end] is the destruction of the symbol, the exposure of its rotten innards, the revelation of the fact that [what was perceived as] general is but private and random.” Ariel Hirschfeld, “‘Ha-sekheh ha-enoshi’ ve-‘sekhel ha-ma’asim’: ha-kelev u-merḥava shel yerushalayim ba-roman *Tmol shilshom* le-shai agnon” [The Human Mind and Minded Deeds] in *Mehkarei yerushalayim be-sifrut ivrit*, 1971, No. 2, p. 66. This theory is based in part on that of W. Kayser (see Hirschfeld, “Ivut ha-merḥav ba-grotesqua bi-*Tmol shilshom*,” pp. 50ff.), rather than of Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s far more capacious, “novelistic,” application of the grotesque, especially the subcategory of “realist grotesque,” with its roots in the “culture of folk humor and the carnival spirit,” as opposed to Kayser’s presentation of the “gloomy, terrifying . . . romantic and modernist grotesque,” is more consistent with the view I am endorsing here (*Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984], pp. 46–58).

Eli Schweid’s reading comes close to Hirschfeld’s; he hears in the novel’s conclusion a mad shriek that echoes in the cosmic vacuum, with no hope for any human or divine resolution beyond the horizon of the novel. “Kelev ḥutzot,” p. 388.

ture of restraint embodied in Isaac's own definition of his craft as a surrogate for the "real" artistic project, and in the narrator's rhetorical distance through metaphor or simile. "*Kaf hadimyon*" (*as or like*) is a term that suggests the *scales* of imagination (justice?) as well as the *means* of imagination, the smallest mediation of simile between the self and the lethal repository of truth. The encounter with the dog is the only instance where Isaac undermines his own profound understanding of his vocation.⁸⁰ Consequently, the dog's quest for the "truth" of his fate, which Isaac sealed with the unmediated conflation of signified and signifier, is what brings him to bite Isaac in order to reach the essence, to find the truth in the thing itself—"I'll bite him and the truth will leak out of his body"⁸¹—a sacramental act not unlike taking communion or entering the Holy of Holies without mediation or distance.⁸²

SURROGATES AND SUBSTITUTES

Like Balak seeking to possess the Truth, attempts abound in this narrative to possess exclusive artistic no less than exclusive religious visions, but the competing aesthetic and moral vision comprehends that the only access without lethal consequence is through acts of mediation or commensuration. Even the Holy City is best approached through a veil. Samson Bloykoff, the truest painter of Isaac's acquaintance, draws a "curtain" or "partition" between himself and the world as he sits in Jerusalem and paints his last pictures, which are a "reflection of a reflection" [*bavua shel bavua*] of the visible world.⁸³

In what may be the most revealing—because concealing—passage in the novel, the narrator produces a verbal equivalent of painting behind a veil. We have already seen that as prototype of the artistic project, Jerusalem is encountered in an instant of perfection; here it is the moment when Sabbath grace covers the dissensions, the poverty and the enmity—the moment when Divine grace [*hashgaha*] countenances even the unworthy: "Anger vanished from their faces and every speech is soft and good, and from every house and every courtyard shine many candles, and the whole city is like a palace adorned with candles and lights."⁸⁴ Again, this model of perfection, of wholeness, of perfection as wholeness, like all the others, lapses into satire or, worse, despair, *in those impatient to realize heaven in the quotidian, whether such impatient are messianists or Zionists.*

But look again: another work of imagination is also offered here, one that is compatible with the aesthetic as well as the spiritual project of the Jew (who is al-

80. Miron brilliantly cites Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" to demonstrate the difference between this act of Isaac's and the self-consciously mimetic artistic enterprise. "Bein shtei neshamot," p. 559.

81. *Only Yesterday*, p. 628; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 593.

82. The communion/crucifixion allusion here can be reinforced by reference to the phrase with which the dying Bloykoff, after nearly choking, curses his fate: "*dam klavim* [lit., dog's blood], *hagenihot ha-lalu ayman menihot la-adam le-saper 'im havelero*"—which is ingeniously translated by Harshav as 'S blood, that wheezing doesn't let a person talk with his friends" (emphasis mine, *Only Yesterday*, p. 225; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 218).

83. *Only Yesterday*, p. 253; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 244.

84. *Only Yesterday*, p. 271; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 262.

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ways) in exile: acknowledging *symbolic* distance from the fulfillment of the project leaves room for human activity, for human flaws and the imperfectability that can be (always only provisionally) addressed by humble and self-deprecating acts of creativity. For even the panoramic view of Jerusalem in the twilight of Sabbath eve, the glimpse we just had of the world to come, adorned with candles and lights, is a view of holiness *as a series of signifying gestures*: “the whole city is *like* a palace adorned with candles and lights.” This passage continues, exposing symbol-making or substitution as the scaffolding of religious practice:

Here a lamp is lit and there a lantern . . . Here a bowl of olive oil and there pure white candles. Here two candles *for* [*keneged*] remember the Sabbath day and keep the Sabbath day, and two tablets of the Covenant, and there ten candles *for* the Ten Commandments. Here seven candles *for* the seven days, and there twelve candles *for* the twelve Tribes of Israel . . .⁸⁵

What all these candle-lighters are engaged in is some form of substitution for the main thing, the thing signified: the temple sacrifice, the tablets of the Covenant, the seven days, the twelve tribes—that which is always distant from us (*keneged*), *even in the Old City of Jerusalem*. These symbols, with the clear recognition of their surrogate status, are what save us from idolatry in the human as in the cultic sector.

Just before he dies, Isaac calibrates and reconciles imagination and reality. A few days after his wedding, and only moments before the fatal encounter with Balak, “Isaac stood and didn’t see anything, for his soul clung to his wife *like a bridegroom in the wedding week*.”⁸⁶ Here, the mating of vision and reality, of signifier and signified, is as complete as any human experience need be—only because it has “some of the former and some of the latter”—always separated by “*kaf ha-dimyon*.” As we have seen, this pseudo-simile has appeared several times in the course of Isaac’s narrative, but here it is his epithalamium—and his epitaph.

Bringing violent closure to Isaac’s story is, therefore, as catastrophic as trying to bring the Messiah or reading the *‘akedah* without its narrative frame or approaching the sacred without a veil: It only shows us how wanting our vision of redemption is when we try to Hasten the End by effacing all the rhetoric of distance—irony, comedy, metaphor: “Finally, his pained soul passed away and he returned his spirit to the God of spirits *for whom there is no laughter and no frivolity*.”⁸⁷ It is when the principle of substitution fails, when the dog is “read” literally, after passing through the Valley of Hinom [*gay ben hinom*], where children were once actually sacrificed to Moloch, that Isaac loses his symbolic, surrogate status and becomes a literal sacrifice. In so doing, his story goes beneath the *‘akedah* to its discarded *Ur*-layer and repudiates the symbolic distance that the biblical narrative *itself* has already incorporated—connecting instead to the level of collective memory that encodes the story as one of realized human sacrifice.⁸⁸

85. *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

86. *Only Yesterday*, p. 623; *Tmol shilshom*, pp. 589, 594. Emphasis mine.

87. *Only Yesterday*, p. 640; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 605. Translation altered.

88. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation of Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

Liberating the ram, as Agnon does by erasure, binds the story to its most primitive, uncanny foundations.

The author himself leads us to this uncanny place in a rare intervention in the process of deciphering *Tmol shilshom*. In his exchange with Kurzweil, Agnon first reiterated his antipathy to allegorical interpretations that resolve metaphoric complexity through literal-minded equivalences, and then (whether to reconstruct his own intertextual journey or to put his friend off-track by throwing him a “piece of meat” we will never know) he referred him to the Talmud [*Sota* 3b] for a clue as to the use of dogs in ancient times as messengers of excommunication. Then Agnon adds:

As for Balak. I know that the readers and even the good critics would be more comfortable if Balak and Isaac were separated, but I am happy to see them together. And if I could explain the relationship between man and animal I would not refrain from doing so. Certainly not before a man like yourself. I do not see myself as a man to whom the mysteries of life are revealed, but something of life’s terror [*miktzat mashehu min ha-ḥavaya ha-mav’ita*] is revealed to me from time to time. And I try as far as possible to mitigate and sweeten it [*le-haf’ima u-lehamtika*]. But here I was unable to do anything but to be its scribe . . .⁸⁹

Life’s terror [*ha-ḥavaya ha-mav’ita*] is introduced in the narrative just before Isaac’s first ecstatic view of Jerusalem that we considered earlier: “The cart is traveling between cliffs and rocks, hills and peaks. Some wear faces of wrath, some of menace [*eimah*], and all of them erupt like little volcanoes rolling down onto the crushed earth at their feet, and the crushed earth writhes like a snake twining around the cart and twisting its chains around it.”⁹⁰ The glimpse of the uncanny can yield, as it does in this passage, to the equanimity of a peaceful reconciliation with the world through a mediated encounter with the holy. Or it can yield to the literal-mindedness that reads the text on Balak’s back as well as the text of Gen. 22 as explicit injunction, *killing* instead of *binding* the innocent one. Balak at the end of the novel becomes the Real in the Lacanian sense: the Real as traumatic site unmediated and unmitigated by the symbolic or the imaginary order.⁹¹ Balak is the vessel through which the *Unheimliche* can be expressed as the space emptied by the withdrawal of the divine presence, or, in the language of Hélène Cixous, the place of “signs without significance.”⁹² Balak offered us hesitation as Isaac of-

89. Agnon, letter to Kurzweil, 28 January, 1946. *Kurzweil-Agnon-UZG: Correspondence*, ed. Lillian Dvi-Guri (Bar Ilan University: 1977), pp. 18–21. My translation.

90. *Only Yesterday*, p. 195; *Tmol shilshom*, p. 189.

91. See Slavoj Žižek on Lacan and the Real: “the hidden/traumatic underside of our existence or sense of reality, whose disturbing effects are felt in strange and unexpected places: the Lacanian Sublime.” Marek Wieczorek, “The Ridiculous, Sublime Art of Slavoj Žižek,” Introduction to Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), p. viii.

92. Cixous’ position is paraphrased by Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p. 68.

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ferred us equanimity; reading Balak literally resolves that hesitation, releases his madness and slaughters Isaac.

Giving up substitution in our search for the Real necessitates the Real Sacrifice. The Real is life's terror or trauma without the mediation of comedy or simile. It invites the reading that Hirschfeld or Miron embraces: not the bridge of the fantastic but the rift or abyss of the grotesque or demonic.⁹³ When Jerusalem becomes the "locus of right answers, [it] is lost, destroyed . . ." ⁹⁴ When the symbolic and imaginary orders break down—the order of simulacra or formless color, of wordless encounters with the holy of holies, of commensuration as the sign of human happiness, and of enigma as the sign of the human quest—then the terrible topos of the *ur-ʿakedah* takes over and, once again, the "test" fails and Moloch devours the children.

Parashat balak read as realism, like the *ʿakedah* read as comedy, licenses a hesitation about phenomena in the real world that reveals a higher truth. Not only is the truth of the vision never resolved, but undecidability provides us a rare glimpse into worlds beyond the phenomenological, without ever losing our foothold in this world.

Maybe the dog bite is not simply the stagecraft of necessary endings but, rather, cosmic nemesis for the murder of desire, for the fatal flaw of literal-mindedness; our own form of idol worship:

That Balaam with his oration, man without a nation,
whose curse turned to blessing and blessing to love
and love to longing and longing to a pain that has no end.
From his window he could still see the pillar of fire
and the pillar of smoke on the horizon,
and the two shall never meet.

—Yehuda Amichai⁹⁵

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93. For Miron, the ultimate difference between *Faust* and *Tmol shilshom* is that in the latter, the sought-after explanation is never found and the story remains trapped in the rift between two 'souls' or centers of gravity ["*ha-shesa' he-ʿamok bein shtei ha-neshamot shel ha-uma*"]. "Bein shtei neshamot," p. 605.

94. Jerusalem remains "alive," then, "only in longing and memory." Hasan-Rokem and Shulman, p. 317. The enigma is the abiding "metaphysical presence" beyond the resolution of any single riddle. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

95. "The Bible and You, the Bible and You, and Other Midrashim," #17, in *Open Closed Open*, trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2000) [from *Patuah sagur patuah*] pp. 26–27.