

Article

The Dog's Passion: *Tmol Shilshom's* Scripture of Violence¹

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I offer a reading of Agnon's work, and especially his classic Zionist novel *Tmol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*), from the perspective of cultural and historical analysis. It is my contention that cultural reading will significantly enhance the scholarship of racism and antisemitism that his works address. Reading *Tmol shilshom* in this fashion affords theoretical and cultural insight into the genealogy and assimilation experiences of the beast (the dog) and the Jew—two figures that challenge the idea of the modern nation by contesting the very possibility of abstraction and symbolism that the national and humanistic imagination enables. I offer a tentative look at the way in which discourse performs identity through violence, that is, differentiation and exclusion. I seek to show that the novel *Tmol shilshom*, written during the Holocaust, combines the colonial experience with the Jewish one, employing a signifier that never renders a coherent symbol and therefore always highlights difference, reluctant to be submerged by any worldview.

Keywords: Hebrew and Jewish literatures, cultural studies, comparative literature, antisemitism, postcolonial studies, queer studies

Who knows it is the spirit of man that ascends on high.
—Kohelet 3:21

VERTICAL TENSION: THE ACT OF WRITING AS IDENTITY-CREATION

The general approach to Agnon tends to concentrate on the aesthetic aspects of his work. Focusing on “the greatest Hebrew storyteller” critics created the impression that Israel is a nation like any other and that Agnon—ostensibly the greatest Jewish writer—is therefore an Israeli writer. Agnon is generally believed to epitomize the “Jewish crisis of modernity”—a rather nebulous concept that captivated some of the foremost intellectuals of his generation (such as Gershom Scholem and Baruch Kurzweil). Yahil Zaban recently published an oppositional manifesto, decrying the dearth of women, Mizrahim, and Arabs in Agnon’s work,² while overlooking the fact that in Agnon, the very figure of the Jew appears self-evident and therefore unworthy of cultural commentary.

Although a number of critics have pointed out that Agnon’s great and allegedly Zionist novel *Tmol shilshom* was written at the height of the Holocaust (notably the American scholar Arnold Band, who even claimed that the novel was an early response to it), and the commentaries on it—especially on the great act of writing at its heart (the painting of the words “Crazy Dog” on the skin of the dog Balak)—would fill a library, it still calls for a careful examination as an act of violent discourse, the act of marking and execration. Verbal violence is, of course, central to racist (including antisemitic) discourse, in invective such as “dirty Jew” (or “Arab” or “negro”). The comparison between the act of marking in *Tmol shilshom* and the Nazi act of marking is all too obvious, especially in light of the Nazi decision to mark Jews with the word “Jew,” in the same tautological and almost comical fashion of writing the word “Dog” on a dog.

Discourse as a site of compulsion, construction, and transformation acts without correlation to the subject, constituting its identity even without the subject’s cooperation.³ The discursive act is violent precisely because it takes no notice of the motives of the individual as an agent—and that is how it appears throughout *Tmol shilshom*. As we shall see, it has theopolitical implications that are in many ways the outcome of this arbitrariness and, in any case, corroborate them.

Uri S. Cohen has read the act of inscription in the novel against the backdrop of colonial relations: Isaac Kumer is able to create an emancipatory identity for himself by signifying a different, inferior, and native identity. While lacking a relation to nativeness, the European immigrant enacts the discrepancies of signifiers in rendering a dog “crazy” in the colonial reality of premandate Palestine.⁴

Michal Arbell shows how Isaac Kumer subconsciously feels irrepressible guilt. This guilt “without words” is, in effect, the “fault of dogness,” including a dubious view of masculinity, which entails passivity and a constant desire to please everyone around him.⁵ Arbell’s analysis of the writing of the word “Dog” on the skin of the dog Balak effectively describes a violent act of constitution. In marking the dog as identical to itself, Isaac seeks to be marked as identical to himself, as wholly non-dog.⁶

The second word written on Balak’s skin, “Crazy,” intensifies the abjection embodied in dogness, and highlights the erotic aspect of the interaction between Isaac and Balak, whereby the canine, feminine man tries to rid himself of his dogness by attaching it to an actual dog. In so doing, the human subject hopes to obtain the masculinity he longs for, and when he fails to do so, turns his wrath against the dog, who sticks to him like a shadow⁷: “He patted his back and told him, From now on, folks won’t mistake you, but will know that you’re a dog. And you won’t forget you’re a dog either. The dog liked his contact with a human creature who has a kind of dripping vessel when the sun is at its height. . . . The dog wagged his tail and barked entreatingly. Isaac smiled and said to him, Are you crazy?”⁸

The idea of writing the second word came to Isaac as a result of the dog’s spontaneous ingratiating behavior. The sensual pleasure afforded by the touch of the wet paint (in the hot, dry Jerusalem air; in many cultures, and in Germanic lands as well, the hot days refer specifically to “mad dogs” in the astrological phenomenon of “dog days”) led Balak to want more writing on his skin, to come closer to Isaac who, frightened by the blatant eroticism of the situation, rebuffed the dog, saying that it is craziness, nonsense. In that, he judges the dog in a somewhat Kantian way, by way of reason (*die Vernunft*), as if the dog’s behavior should follow its rules. The dog, like the narrator—in a sort of free, indirect discourse (since a dog cannot be given a voice, some

degree of hybridity is required, albeit in a very limited fashion, because we do not conceive of the dog's language at all), calls Isaac "the man with the brush," and the painter remains identified in the dog's consciousness with this wet phallicity throughout the story. The erotic sensation is described in great detail, offering meticulously realistic physical characterizations: "The dog lifted his wet nose and barked a weak, obsequious bark. Isaac's hand began to tingle, like an artist whose hand approaches his work. He rubbed it on his clothes to get rid of the tingling, but it kept on tingling. . . . The dog stretched himself toward him and looked at his brush as if with curiosity. In truth, there was no curiosity here, but there was a flirtation."⁹

It must be said that curiosity is not a positive quality in Agnon's works, as evidenced for example in Manfred Herbst's obsession with the nurse Shira (*Shira*, 1971). Here, however, the narrator explicitly states that it was a flirtation.¹⁰ In Rashi's commentary on the prohibition of homosexual intercourse (Leviticus 20:13), the act is described as: "*makhnis mikhhol bi-shfoferet*" (inserting a brush [or applicator] into a tube), using the same word that Agnon uses for brush (*mikhhol*)—a euphemism employed to this day in Jewish orthodoxy. Furthermore, the word *kelev* (dog) in the Bible may also signify a male prostitute, according to one interpretation of Deuteronomy 23:18–19.¹¹ The following paragraph describes Isaac's happiness at what he believed to be his original invention: actually writing on a dog's skin rather than tying notes of excommunication to dogs' tails.¹² Excommunication appears throughout *Tmol shilshom*, particularly in relation to the fanatical Reb Fayesh of the Hungarian Society, father of Shifra, who would become Isaac's wife. The attention given to writs of excommunication—whether on the skin of a dog, on notes tied to dogs' tails, or on posters (like the ones Fayesh pasted up secretly at night)—is inexorably linked to Isaac's articulation-writing on the skin of Balak, since he is cast out and persecuted by the Jewish community of Mea Shearim. History's most egregious identification between a writ of excommunication and a physical body is, of course, the badge affixed to all of the abjects created by German nationalism in 1941, with the promulgation of the infamous decree regarding the yellow star. The practice originated, however, in the Middle Ages, as yellow was a color associated with Jews and prostitution,¹³ and resurfaced in Germany in the

nineteenth century, with the proposal of the German philosopher Jakob Friedrich Fries to require Jews to wear a distinctive sign on their clothing.¹⁴ Agnon would appear to have made the particularly subversive choice of providing thorough representation of writs of excommunication, specifically among the Jews, at the very time that they themselves were being marked (as the novel was being written) as unequivocal victims.¹⁵

Agnon outlines the deep structure of the motivation behind the use of language as a badge, linking text and body to the point of forming a single outcast. For Agnon's narrator, the dog has a name: not Crazy Dog, but Balak. That is what the dog is called when the narrator focuses on his unbearably rich inner world. When he accompanies Isaac, however, even the narrator refers to the animal, in another kind of free indirect discourse, simply as "the dog" ("He reached out his brush to the dog, and the dog reached himself out to Isaac"). In so doing, the narrator participates in Isaac's act of execration, by which he hopes to establish his own non-dog identity. Isaac "was happy" because he had espoused language's most violent act: naming, which, in this case, coincides with the unification of signifier and signified (whether in the descriptor "Crazy Dog" or in the name Balak itself—written *BLQ* in Hebrew—which is a misspelled reversal of the word *KLB*, dog).¹⁶ This intimate-psychologicistic literary moment between man and dog allows the reader to observe, at a glance, the anonymous and zoological entity that comprises both humans and animals. Despite the psychological nature of the situation, it is, above all, a theopolitical moment, inasmuch as it affords insight into the mechanism of abandonment through culture, with "name and remnant" (the Hebrew expression for a descendant of the deceased), which Agnon's Zionist protagonist is denied, a destiny he shares with stray dogs.¹⁷

This act of writing is theopolitical because the comparison between Jew and dog is one of the most frequent images in Holocaust literature written by Jews, accepting the common comparison between Jews and dogs in European antisemitism dating back to the Middle Ages.¹⁸ Since stray dogs, until relatively recently, could be found in all areas of human habitation, they symbolized human degradation, conceptualized as "bare life."¹⁹ In countless testimonies and writings of victims and survivors, Jews are compared to dogs, because, like dogs, they became anonymous bodies on the side of

the road, subjected to arbitrary violence—superfluous bodies that are like cadavers. The coupling of Jews with dogs, and the idea of the dog as a symbol of human inferiority, can be found in Psalm 59—a psalm that has been subjected to radically different Jewish and Christian readings. The psalm is about fear of an enemy, which Jewish tradition identifies with the psalmist's fear of King Saul and his agents. The verse “They come back at evening, they mutter like dogs. They prowl round the town” (trans. Robert Alter) appears twice in the psalm (in verses 7 and 15) in reference to the enemy, and presages the historical animosity between Jews and dogs; a sense of terror that permeates *Tmol shilshom*, a fear of their every growl and bark. The Christian interpretation of the psalm highlights verse 12, “Do not kill them lest my people forget,” in support of the Augustinian doctrine of “Jewish witness,” whereby the Jewish people must be preserved in order to serve as a living testimony to the Christian Messiah. According to this interpretation, the enemy in question is none other than the Jewish people themselves, and it is they who are compared to dogs.

This is also the way Franz Kafka relates to the signifier and its never-realized referent, “Gregor Samsa giant vermin,” in *The Metamorphosis* (1915). To this day we do not know exactly what this referent is (its size makes it clear that it is not a bug). The word *Ungeziefer* (vermin) derives from a late Middle High German word originally meaning “the unclean animal not suited for sacrifice.”²⁰ This is a weighty theological signifier comparable to one of the most mysterious signifiers in the Hebrew language: the *shikkutz meshomem*, which indicates a desecration of the Temple, in the book of Daniel. It belongs to the weightiest register in Agnon's Hebrew, and in *Ir u-mlo'ah* (*A City in Its Fullness*, 1973) he uses it to refer to Nazi Germany. Kafka chose the most precise word to describe abjection (reverberating the abomination). He did so in a story with incredibly powerful political (and perhaps also theological) ramifications but, like Agnon, within an intimate framework dedicated to family relations.²¹ The *shikkutz meshomem* (rendered “appalling abomination,” in the Jewish Publication Society's 1985 translation of the Bible), the vermin Samsa, the “Crazy Dog,” and the yellow badge are all signifiers that fail to constitute coherent signs, and therefore preserve their essential linguistic act as an abjection to the humanistic subject.

Isaac's laughter—undoubtedly reflecting sensory elation, like tragic hubris—stems from the fact that he has finally done something. Isaac goes from passive protagonist—his most prominent features, as the novel follows his thoughts, are the dreams and musings of a simple “man of imagination,” who moves from pioneering Jaffa to Jerusalem and returns to religion through the back door—to someone who acts in the world, who chooses to perform a sovereign act worthy of the Creator Himself. Even more than Arzef, the story's macabre taxidermist, Isaac, becomes an artisan for whom animals are entirely objectified: “Isaac just stroked the dog's skin, like a clerk stroking the paper before writing.”²²

After he has finished writing on the dog's skin, Isaac kicks the dog—an act of penetration in the context of his efforts to constitute masculinity.²³ Here too, however, the experience is one of uncontrolled erotic desire that leads to its own violent execration. Isaac is pleased with the creativity of his act of writing and, in order to disseminate his words, kicks the dog for the first time, that it might go out in the world: “He kicked the dog to make him wander around the city and advertise his deed. The dog opened his mouth wide and peered at him in amazement. He treated him with affection and in the end he kicks him. He lowered his eyes. That one's eyes smile and his feet are angry. Don't his feet know that he's just having fun.”²⁴

The narrator chooses to see the world together with the dog, from below, and therefore focuses on the ostensible physical discrepancy between Isaac's violent feet and his friendly, happy face. The dog reveals a discrepancy in the protagonist's personality, which he understands, thereby gaining superiority over Isaac. Beyond the pleasure he experiences as a sovereign actor, Isaac's laughing stems from his sexual interaction with the dog, from taking an active part in life and objectifying the other. The discrepancy between face and feet shows the erotic unconscious (laughter and pleasure), which is shaken when faced with the conscious superego (the kick). Arbell is correct in her analysis, because in his encounter with the actual dog, that is, the unification of canine content with canine form, Isaac is able to discover that he is potentially heteronormative: a sovereign man and not an animal. This knowledge of masculinity, however, also entails erotic excitement, and as a result of Isaac's own

dogness, provokes the horror that leads to violence: the superego can never accept this kind of desire.²⁵ Balak is superior not only because he is aware of the psychological discrepancy in Isaac, but primarily because he himself desires and submits without restraint, as the phallic imagery continues: “The dog wound around Isaac’s steps and raised his face toward his brush. He hit the paint bucket and almost turned it over. Isaac hit his leg and it bled.”²⁶ The realistic scene focuses on the physical event, using objects (characteristic of the grotesque), and ending in the release of blood, as an act of loss of virginity.

The verticality of the physical discrepancy between the two creatures—one upright on two legs, elevated above the other who is on all fours—shows a difference that also reflects a particular sexual practice, and can be found in the lengthy descriptions of the creeping vermin in Kafka’s story. In sexual practice upright humans become creatures on four legs, physically connecting with their own dogness, exposed to their desperate need of the other, their sense of smell, their excretory, ingestive, and reproductive organs.²⁷ This hyperrealism, which focuses on the body and the objects in the scene as a site of metonymy (the brush is Isaac, “the man with the brush”) and bodily fluids, returns at the bitter end of the story.

Dan Miron highlights this vertical drama in his comparison of *Tmol shilshom* and Goethe’s *Faust*—in which the protagonist expresses the rift in his personality, with one part attracted downward, toward the sensual world, and the other upward, toward faith and spirituality, embodied in ancestral tradition (*Faust I*: lines 1112–21). Miron identifies the very same rift in Isaac Kumer’s divided soul, as he experiences a moment of crisis between tradition and secularism. Regarding Kumer’s dream, in which his head ascends to the upper story of a synagogue, while his body hangs out the window, having climbed up a ladder, Miron notes: “Like Faust, Isaac perceives himself through the metaphor of vertical rather than horizontal space.”²⁸ In Jewish tradition, the book of Kohelet questions the idea of such a vertical rift: “Who knows whether man’s spirit goes upward and the beast’s spirit goes down to the earth?” (3:21; trans. R. Alter).

Below, I will also discuss how Miron’s study pertains to the issue of antisemitism.

THE ANIMAL AND DISCOURSE: THE LIMITS OF SIGNS

Writing on the dog's skin was a fatal blow to the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community of Jerusalem, shaken to the core by the very idea of a mad dog. Throughout this time, Isaac himself was in Jaffa, until he returned and restored calm by admitting to his shameful act of writing. The writing is thus no longer a matter of threatening theological metaphysics, but is transformed into a comic realistic phenomenon. Isaac provides the amazed crowd with an after-the-fact account: "I dipped my brush and wrote on the dog's skin D O G, that is dog. When I saw that he wasn't *satisfied* with that, I added C R A Z Y, that is crazy."²⁹

Although the description is meant to convey to the crowd the precise course of events, we are struck by the absence of deliberation. If there is any agency at all, it is embodied by the dog, who causes the writing hand to go on, because "he wasn't satisfied with that." The fact that he first spells out the letters and only then reads the signifier of the word itself, shows that the "artist" has no volition at all, but is rather a tool. The sign is constructed as *différance*, whereby the signifier takes precedence over the signified, and exists only inasmuch as it is not other signifiers, because it too leaves abject remnants: a D that is not an O, that is not a G, that is not an H, an I, and so forth.³⁰

The utter fortuity of the shameful deed at the heart of one of the great Hebrew classics entails a kind of violence that is palpable in all its symbolic systems. That which is done by chance, as a "game" that serves as a default for reality itself, is not without emotional consequences and does not eliminate accountability, which also renders its theological ramifications. Therefore, although Isaac seems to act unconsciously, the representation of Balak maintains consistency with the site of desire. The bitter end thus arrives as retribution: "Balak shook his head, thinking to himself, He goes on his way, and I—I stay here despised and downtrodden."³¹ Isaac's hubris, in taking God's place, arbitrarily creating and killing and even forgetting, is met by the hubris of Balak who, after having submitted completely, decides to rise up against his maker, to demand revenge against one who has failed to take responsibility for his actions (and his latent desire). Isaac continues to be passive, allowing events and signifiers and chance to decide for him, while Balak

is both acted upon by them and acts upon them in a manner that exposes the desire that lies at their heart.

It ends with a plastic physical description. The possibility that the dog will leap and bite increases, turning over and over in the dog's mind; and blood, like the blood drawn in that first scene, becomes a motif:

Balak's heart began trembling and both his eyes got bloodshot . . . and his mouth was filled with foam . . . [and he] looked at the feet of the man with the brush. . . . The wrinkle in Balak's eyes grew dark and the white disappeared from them. His mouth was filled with foam and his teeth began rattling. And he was rattling too. He wanted to leap on Isaac. In the end, he turned his face away from him and buried his mouth in the ground. . . . Said Balak, I won't approach him calmly and I won't raise my voice, but I'll bite him and the truth will leak out of his body. . . . But he immediately lowered his eyes from Isaac. . . . His guts began grinding inside him . . . and even his spleen caused him grief and torments. . . . Your guts dwell inside you and they do whatever they want. . . . He saw the man with the brush standing. The wrinkle in Balak's eyes turned dark again and his teeth rattled. He began to fear he would bite himself and blood would come out of him as on the day the painter kicked him in the mouth. His lips started foaming and his tongue started bubbling up bitter foam, as if his gall had dissolved and flooded his mouth. . . . He lowered his eyes from him and got up to go. . . . A sweet bubble began bubbling between his teeth. . . . His teeth stood erect and his whole body was taut. Before Isaac could start walking, the dog leaped on him and sank his teeth in him and bit him.³²

Balak's confused consciousness and scurrying back-and-forth desire presages the fatal moment of the bite from the very first time we encounter the dog, reaching its climax in the bite scene itself.

The disease affects Isaac's body, and there is a focus on his damaged erotic vitality: his swallowing apparatus, his muscles, and "all the places where the dog had bitten him,"³³ although we know of only one bite: "His wounds began to swell up and turn red, and finally they opened by themselves and a stinking pus began bubbling out of them. . . . His swallowing

apparatus contorted and his breathing apparatus shriveled and so did the muscles of his body and the muscles of his legs.”³⁴

The attribution of Isaac’s illness to rabies is important, because he suffers the same symptoms as Balak, effectively becoming a mad dog. Although we know that Agnon studied the subject of rabies while writing his novel, he chose not to mention the disease by name. Kumer’s disease is thus the all-encompassing and essential “fault of dogness.” It lies primarily in the physical metamorphosis that stands in complete opposition to the concept of beauty in civilization. Isaac’s illness is, in a sense, a venereal disease, resulting from the contact of saliva and blood, and its symptoms are the erotic decay of the body.

With the advent of AIDS, metaphorical discourse surrounding illness reached its extreme, focusing on marginalized groups of presumed “sinners”—homosexuals and drug addicts—whose nonheteronormative behavior was believed to have necessarily brought about the disease.³⁵ AIDS resembled rabies, inasmuch as both illnesses dominate discourse despite their relatively low prevalence. The metaphorical uniqueness of AIDS, as compared to cancer, lies in its contagiousness but primarily in its latency (like rabies).

Blood is a central motif in divine worship as established in the prerabbinic age, and at the end of *Tmol shilshom* would appear to possess something of the quality of the signified—that which does not know the difference between animals and humans. After wandering among signifiers, remnants, and associations, Balak reveals that beneath language lies the unity of body and blood: “And after he dug himself a hole in the flesh of the painter and dripped the truth from it, the truth should have filled all his being, but in the end there is no truth and no nothing. And he is still as at the beginning, as if he hadn’t done a thing. . . . And once again he was amazed, for man is made of special material, yet in the end, his flesh is no different from most animals.”³⁶

The essence of Agnon’s treatment of physical matter, anatomy, the absorptive properties of the skin, and the inner flesh and blood is carnivalesque, and is familiar from Bakhtin’s exploration of the world of François Rabelais—a body of literature that deals almost obsessively with the human body, its orifices, and its inner-outer relations.³⁷ What we clearly find in the

biting scene is a reversal of roles, with the dog playing the active part, turning the man's flesh into an objective concept of desire.

Other men in Agnon's works are also affected by such dogness. Arbell interprets Arzef's taxidermy, for example, not as an act of hunting or trapping, but as one of seduction and desire, since the hyenas seek him out, asking to be stuffed by him and not the opposite.³⁸ According to the explanation that Lilith offers Balak, the desire to be stuffed by the taxidermist stems from the possibility of eternal existence that does not involve the inside of the body, the flesh, and therefore precludes suffering. Interestingly, this is also the explanation that Shoshanah, the sickly protagonist of the novella *Shvu'at emunim* (*Betrothed*, 1943), gives for her attraction to stuffed animals and Egyptian mummies. When Shoshanah lays her hands out on the table, the male protagonist Jacob Rechnitz is reminded of the way in which the taxidermist Arzef (Ilyushin, in Lever's English translation) would spread his hands out "when he was stretching an animal skin on a board."³⁹ Agnon often alludes to his own works, and Arzef's inclusion in *Shvu'at emunim* seems almost natural, since it is, like *Tmol shilshom*, a story about the Second Aliyah in Palestine. Yet, in repeating, almost word for word, the description of the physical gesture of stroking the animal's skin, it is as if Agnonian discourse is trying to remind us of the outer covering, and with it the question of carnival and realism. The macabre world of the second part of *Tmol shilshom*, with its protagonists Balak, Lilith, Arzef, and the hyenas, also comes to mind in this context, again signifying the question of sign and discourse, since the body, like the sign, has boundaries, that is the skin of the animal, to which the narrator returns again and again.

Critics have already noted Isaac's affinity to male characters such as Arzef or Sweet Foot. What I would like to stress here is that ultimately, it is the question of masculinity that constitutes the entire dark tragedy, since Isaac, unlike Arzef (or Rabinovitch), never completely plays the active role. Thus, in one of his dreams, he identifies Sweet Foot's dog with the aforementioned hyenas:

All night long, Isaac strove to remember the name of a man he and his comrades had gone to visit in Eyn Rogel. That man's dwelling, and the mat he lay

on and the books he read, as well as all kinds of stuffed animals he saw there stood all that while before Isaac's eyes, and even the voices of his comrades calling him by name did Isaac hear, but the name he couldn't remember. At last, when Isaac did succeed in remembering Arzef's name, he found him standing in Sweet Foot's hut, stroking Sweetiepie's teeth and calling him as a female, Come, girlie, come, and Sweetiepie enjoys and is pampered by him like a female. . . . Once again, Isaac saw Arzef, lying on his mat and reading *The Fables of Foxes*. And the book was strange for it wasn't made of letters but of voices. Even stranger was that all those voices were composed of two syllables. Isaac looked at the book to see what those syllables were and saw that his own hand strolls over to the book and writes Arf arf.⁴⁰

Later in the dream, there is a strange dialogue between Rabinovitch, who is dressed like a woman and pretends to be a peacock. Here too, voice emerges from letters: the E and O that together produce the voice of the peacock.⁴¹ Beyond the aspect of signification and parallels between language and the voice—growl, bleat, bark—of the animal, the “arf arf” (*hav hav*) form is repeated a number of times throughout the novel, and signifies the Hebrew imperative “give [me]!” (*hav*), which lends itself to the passive subjectivity of animals to satisfy their needs for sex and meat, in their hunger for the creation of man (taxidermist, autarchic)—evident in the dog's obsequiousness in the dream as well.

This coincides with the explicit misogyny and “state of equanimity” that embodies the autarchy and even autochthony of the self-sufficient, self-assured man (who, according to Miron, combines ancestral tradition with modernity),⁴² including the religious obligation to resist evil:

Said Sweet Foot . . . I already promised Goldman to go with him to Nablus, for the Pasha has appointed him engineer of all Nablus. But I don't want to go with him, because I don't like the Arabs who are idle as women and give their work to you like women, and after you do their job, they think they've done you a favor. Skin yourself alive, my love, and make me a nice fur. And since you flayed the skin off your flesh, the woman has turned her eyes to somebody else's skin. And so, that Effendi sent for me. If you want,

go to him, but not today, for he hates a Jew who violates the Sabbath. . . . If we don't distinguish between Sabbath and weekday, the Gentile says, To me, you are contemptible. . . . In truth, I don't know what a transgression is. . . . Since I ponder, I don't do it, and since I don't do it, my heart is at peace. . . . And so I refrain from everything that looks to me like a transgression. And if so, the Commandments may be the same, for a Commandment is doing, and doing drives out peace. . . . And even though there is something and its opposite here, I reach a state of equanimity.⁴³

This is a rare window, within polyphonic Agnonian speech, into the prosaic, everyday attitude of the Labor Zionist *halutzim* (pioneers) to the natives. The coupling of femininity with passivity expresses an orientalist view of the lazy Arabs who lack the drive for labor and conquest. Yet, in the middle of Sweet Foot's monologue, he gives voice to the women (and by implication, the Arabs) themselves, who seek protection in the skins of their men. The use of skin here cries out, to the point of changing the expression making eyes at somebody to making eyes at somebody's skin. This linguistic figuration marks this monologue as one of the most important in the novel, since the world of the animal, with its characteristic skin, is associated with a desiring female position. This is immediately linked to the Torah portion of Balak, eventually coming back to the Effendi and his respect for Jews who observe the precepts, demonstrating the tremendous cultural value of the religious approach. One who observes the precepts is worthy of respect, a bulwark against the dependent female position, in need of a male subject to "rule over her" (as expressed in Eve's curse). Sweet Foot then offers a philosophical explanation of the state of equanimity, rendered possible because observing the commandments brings peace, thereby resolving the dialectic of passive female desire that necessarily leads to transgression. The passage opens a window on the colonial nature of the Zionist project, since Muslim opposition to nonobservant Jews is, in effect, opposition to secularization and Zionism as a European movement.⁴⁴

Flesh features prominently in *Shira* (1971), Agnon's last novel about the prestate Yishuv. The phrase "Flesh such as yours will not soon be forgotten" (a line from a poem by Sh. Shalom) constantly plays in the protagonist Manfred Herbst's mind, in relation to the flesh of Shira, the nurse, which is freckled

(considered mannish and coarse, in the book) and, ultimately, stricken with leprosy—according to one of the novel’s possible endings (entitled “Final Chapter”), and in the story *Ad olam* (*Forever*), initially an integral part of *Shira*. Hirschfeld’s interpretation of the fourth book of the novel (considered its conclusion by some) links Herbst’s homosexual desires to his fear of castration, which arise during the course of his work on a tragedy about a leprosy slave. Herbst’s failure in writing the tragedy was due to the fact that “poetry and imagination . . . require that the soul expand. . . . Herbst didn’t achieve this, because he didn’t immerse his mind in the subject, for he was sensitive and found it difficult to tolerate infected blood.”⁴⁵ In *Shira*, the canine role is played by Shira, the slave Basileios (protagonist of the tragedy that Herbst tries to finish), and the homosexuality of Sir David Birkenthal, a British officer murdered by his Arab lover. Looking through Sir David’s books, Herbst suffers an anxiety attack.⁴⁶ It is worth noting another similarity between the dog Balak and the nurse Shira, as expressed in a sexual encounter with a neighbor, whom she refers to as “my lord and master,” in which he engages in the BDSM practice of lashing her with a whip, which she finds arousing.⁴⁷ Another anecdote that relates to these Jerusalem surroundings of excitable speech is Agnon’s own incitement speech in a letter to his wife where he related to his encounter with the Arab lover of Jacob Israël de Haan, the Duch-Jewish journalist and poet who was assassinated by the Hagana in 1924. Agnon describes him with extreme tones that, among his immense work, could only be compared with the Jerusalem crowd in *Tmol shishom*: “this was the common-law friend of de Haan may his name and memory be obliterated, that is, his wife, devil phooey.”⁴⁸ To sum this, it seems that Isaac is not able to maintain a sovereign and masculine position in the turmoil of land that was suffused with chauvinistic tensions in the age of consolidating a new Jew.⁴⁹ With his play with the dog, it is the latter that seems to have advantage.

Skin and flesh lead to a discussion of Balak as a symbol or an allegory, a widely debated topic in Hebrew literary criticism. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi offers an overview of this debate, in which she employs both Bakhtian polyphony and the carnivalesque.⁵⁰ Agnon himself addressed the question of the dog’s symbolism in his famous reply to Kurzweil, in which he claimed that his Balak story is wholly devoid of literary intent, and merely presents

terrifying things as they really are.⁵¹ Balak defies interpretation, since he touches the very question of the material symbol of the flesh.⁵² Like the body, so the sign “crazy dog” (like that of the giant vermin) reaches the limit that denies linguistic and intellectual virtuosity any way out.⁵³ The identity of body and text is thus revealed in all its materiality, as if in contrast to the spirit and mind that animate man and writing.

The elements of skin and covering so prominent in taxidermy also present an ethical demand. Derrida extends Levinas' ethical demand presented by the face of the Other to the realm of the animal. “The question of the animal” is rendered possible and created by the animal's gaze, which I face and by means of which I am faced with my own existence.⁵⁴ Calarco's study seeks to reconcile the question of the animal with identity politics, and indeed the question of anthropocentrism is related to the question of this inscrutable sign, the question of skin and face. Like Levinas' face of the Other, the animal is a kind of inscrutable figure that philosophy and science are unable to unravel, because it is language that sets them apart and makes them inscrutable (the face and the animal) to begin with.⁵⁵ It is thus no wonder that Kumer and Herbst develop a sense of alienation from identity discourse through their approach to language. By way of further apologia against Zaban's accusations, it could be said that Agnon, in his constant engagement with animals, actually plumbs the very depths of identity discourse, by addressing what Derrida called “the question of the animal.”

Tmol shilshom teaches us that discourse and language set humans apart from the biological world, but also bind them together in an inherently impossible imperative: the imperative of heteronormativity. All humans are equal in that they are all bearers of this impossibility, of something that they fail to live up to by definition. In participating in language, humans are radically particular (hence their proper names) that renders each partial, when there is in fact a universal equality: blood. The exposure of man and animal to blood reveals a flawed and vulnerable essentiality (culture or virtuosity notwithstanding). In denying the ability of discourse to truly elevate humans above the level of creatures—in exposing the cruelty with which discourse imbues its human creatures—we also find the demand to see humankind as a source of extraordinary weakness.

THE DOG'S PASSION AND THE DISCOURSE OF ANTISEMITISM

The limits of humanism are evident in its aspiration to the universal, while constantly encountering the particular. This is apparent here in the skin of the living object destined to die or to be stuffed by the taxidermist (as in Shoshanah's wish). This is the tension at the heart of Hegel's discussion of the question of the animal. Unlike man, whose thought possesses the power of universality (*Allgemeinheit*), the animal remains separate, diseased, unable to integrate into the general organic body. Hegel identifies the animal with sickness, and man with the ability to organize—embodied, at its best, in nationalism. Will, for Hegel, is that which allows man, by means of thought, to rise above impulse (*Instinkt*) and drive (*Trieb*). It is animal's inability to integrate into a whole that makes its life so exposed and sick, "insecure, anxious, and unhappy."⁵⁶ It thus comes as no surprise that the animal also pertains to the Jewish Question. Both heighten the tension between the universal and the particular, with the Jews being a foreign people (*ein fremdes Volk*), but above all human beings (*zuallererst Menschen*).⁵⁷ The imagined nature of nation, as we understand it today—built on printing, capitalism and the signifiers embedded in the novel, the newspaper, and the museum⁵⁸—lies at the heart of the human power of thought as understood by Hegel. It is language and discourse that enables the nation, which, in turn, enables thoughts of the universal, but also encounters the outcast bodies of the animal and the Jew, which signify the limits of abstraction and of sovereignty.

Andrew Benjamin shows how "bare life"—the concept used by Agamben to study states of exception that share time and space—marks the particular body subject to signification in the process of "animality,"⁵⁹ the product of history, of what was not but has become animal. Due to continuity between human and animal, by separation from the political, the human becomes zoological.⁶⁰ In writing on the dog's skin, Isaac marked Balak as an outcast body of a state of exception as part of Jerusalem's fanaticism, relegating him to bare life.

A prime example of the process whereby that which was human is removed to the realm of bare life can be found in Agnon's *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* (1911).⁶¹ For the purposes of the present discussion, however,

the most important aspect of this process is continuity, rendered possible by Hegelian thought. The fact that the animal is not entirely separate from the human and must therefore be shed (like Isaac Kumer's dogness) is also central to Meshulam Tochner's observation that the animals in Agnon's works are far more complex than their human counterparts, as reflected in the well-known assertion: "The historian will have to conduct an exhaustive study to determine where the adventures of human beings end and the adventures of dogs begin."⁶²

Writing on the dog's skin is an act of political violence. This is exactly how hate speech works, and what lies at the heart of antisemitic discourse. A sign that says "whites only" acts on two levels: it is both descriptive, expressing the discriminatory idea, and performative, constituting discrimination.⁶³ Discourse is given agency in the world, and is, in itself, perceived as transgressive. Social marks are understood in accordance with the social conventions that create them, and Balak becomes a crazy dog by virtue of the prevailing opinion that that is what he is.⁶⁴ This is also what marks Isaac's failed act of sovereignty, which nonetheless bears theopolitical implications.

Two provocative readings that have received little attention deserve to be mentioned. The first is that of Alon Hilu, who compares the dog, Balak, to a current of violence beneath the ostensibly calm and naive surface of the text—as a Palestinian reaction to the Zionist conquest of Palestine.⁶⁵ Hilu compares Balak to the prevailing perception of Islamic terrorism in Israel, as reflected in the charged word "*shahid*" (martyr), which plays a relatively negligible role in Arabic. Although Hilu's interpretation of the story's undecipherable symbolism tends to simple allegory, it gets to the heart of the marking of the outcast. A postcolonial reading of the novel is a useful endeavor, and relates to various aspects of antisemitism.⁶⁶

The focus on Balak's body ("His teeth stood erect and his whole body was taut") evokes not only the fear of terrorist attack, but also the essence of the objectified body of the colonial subject, as described, for example, throughout the anti-colonialist writings of Frantz Fanon. This tension between body and text is manifest in the case of the dog, as it is in the writings of Fanon, and Hilu has only touched the surface.⁶⁷

The second reading, that of Moshe Halahmi, views the figure of Balak as an embodiment of Jesus and his suffering. Halahmi shows how the figure

of the dog developed in Jewish tradition not only as a symbol of non-Jews in general and Christians in particular, but of Jesus himself, in the Kabbalah and Hasidism of seventeenth-century Poland.⁶⁸ His far-reaching conclusion is that *Tmol shilshom* is practically a theodicy of the Holocaust, and certainly constitutes criticism of the Orthodox Jewish tendency to hate the other, whether non-Jews in general, Christians, Jesus, dogs, *maskilim*, or Zionists.⁶⁹ Halahmi's analysis cannot be taken at face value, of course, as it makes Agnon out to be the greatest humanist of all time, embracing Christian charity (even toward Christianity itself, during a period in which Jews were being slaughtered in Europe). Nevertheless, it does identify some of the text's subversiveness: "Writing 'Crazy Dog' on the skin of the dog and the cruel spilling of its blood repeat the execration of Jesus on the cross—the cross that bore the inscription 'King of the Jews.' Banishing the dog from the Jewish neighborhoods repeats the removal of Jesus' disciples from the synagogues and Jewish communities, branding them as heretics."⁷⁰

Jewish and Christian relations resonate colonial tensions, which were current in late antiquity, and especially with the story of Christ. It is therefore important to mention one of Thomas Mann's earliest stories, "Tobias Mindernickel" (1898), which revolves around an inhibited and docile man/dog who is able to conceive the position of master within a sadistic relationship with his dog Esau. The story resembles the sacrificial figuration of Christianity, with pain and wounds as a source for repentance, but it has of course also antisemitic overtones due to the name of the poor dog. Mann dealt later with the man/dog relation in his idyll *A Man and His Dog* (1917), which is a mirror image to "Mindernickel" and to Agnon's depiction, because there he uses language to draw the line between man and beast. Nonetheless, the linguistic-humanistic endeavor in and of itself are part of a symbolic system of tensions, which were known to Agnon.⁷¹

In order to provide support for Halahmi's intuition, the connection between execration, excommunication, anti-Judaism, and antisemitism should be explored. If we consider the literary context of *Tmol shilshom*, we must ask ourselves, which Jerusalem-based drama of excommunication, execration, and persecution, related to the understanding of Scripture, would

have come readily to Agnon's mind if not the story of the crucifixion? The passions in particular—the drama of the end of Jesus' life—would have come readily to Agnon, due to their widespread presence in the German-speaking world in general and in Lutheran theology in particular. Agnon, as we know, spent twelve crucial years of his life in and around Berlin, during the First World War and in its aftermath, returning to Palestine only in 1924, at the age of thirty-seven. These were stormy years for German nationalism, inexorably linked to fateful theological questions, eventually leading to the Final Solution. The Passion according to Matthew—the most extreme of the passions, in terms of blaming the Jews for the murder of the Messiah—enjoyed tremendous visibility in Germany in those years, particularly in dramatic adaptations of the music of J. S. Bach. In the opinion of the theologian H. Preuss, for example, Luther and Bach (undoubtedly his greatest musical interpreter) saw Jesus first and foremost as “The Crucified One” (*Der Gekreuzigte*), before Messiah, teacher, or revolutionary.⁷² The drama of the crucifixion was immensely popular during the transition period from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich,⁷³ and the most striking figure of all in these dramatizations of the Jerusalem myth was the community of the fanatical, fearful, and hate-ridden Jews. The most challenging choral parts, in which Bach's polyphony soars to its most exquisite heights, are those of the Jewish mob. It is the same fanaticism that Agnon painted so artfully in the scenes of Rebbe Grunam's harsh sermons and the violence that accompanied them.⁷⁴

The antisemitic escalation in Germany in the 1930s was accompanied by just such theatrical performances, processions of humiliation, and execration in the city and town centers. It is hard not to see these performances as a new embodiment of the passion—with the Jews in the role of the crucified one.⁷⁵ For example, during a forced march of Jewish men to the synagogue in Baden-Baden, two community members held a Star of David with the ironic inscription “God, do not abandon us!” As one eyewitness remarked, “What I saw was not one Christ, but a whole column of Christ figures.”⁷⁶ The inscription refers, albeit unconsciously, to the words of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (which normally appears in Hebrew transliteration within the German text: “*Eli, Eli, lama asabthani?*”; itself a New Testament repurposing of the words of David in Psalm 22:2).

The mockery of the “King of the Jews” in his futile appeal to God is also shared by Bach’s Jewish mob, which calls upon the alleged king to show his power and save himself.

The drama of the passion is a writ of violence. Anti-Jewish signs and inscriptions proliferated throughout the German Reich in the 1930s, along with dozens if not hundreds of anti-Jewish decrees (some absurd, such as “Jews are prohibited from buying cakes” or “Jews are prohibited from studying English”), in addition to the marking with the Jewish badge. According to one testimony, a sign at the entrance to a Bavarian hotel read “No entrance to dogs and Jews!”⁷⁷ Both Hilu and Halahmi mention Psalm 59, in which non-Jews are described as dogs, but both miss the symmetrically opposed Christian interpretation, whereby the dogs are actually the Jews. The speaker implores God, “Save me from my enemies,” and twice describes the enemy, with the motif: “They come back at evening, they mutter like dogs. They prowl round the town” (verses 7 and 15). The polar difference between the Jewish and Christian reading stems from the contradiction posed by the speaker with regard to this enemy. On the one hand, “And You, Lord . . . awake to make a reckoning with all the nations. Do not pardon all wrongdoing traitors” (v. 6; trans. R. Alter); and on the other, “Do not kill them lest my people forge.” (v. 12). Verse 12 stands at the heart of the Augustinian doctrine of “Jewish witness,” which forbids the killing of Jews, not only because their continued existence serves as testimony to Christianity’s supersessionism, but also because the Jews, wretched and scattered as they are, bear witness to the sufferings of Jesus.⁷⁸ The identification of Jesus with the Jews is thus an age-old practice. The sign of the dog as an outcast is therefore a theopolitical sign after all, albeit contested in the drama of national sovereignty.

The way these verses are understood is a matter of life and death, which lies at the heart of hostility between Jews and Christians, since both religions relate to the same textual canon. The Christian motivation in revealing the truth, which will lead to universal conversion, actually stems from the Jewish reputation for scholarship, which makes the failure of the chosen people to understand Scripture all the more clamorous. Viewed from a historiographical perspective, the Church has tended to vacillate between two positions: the desire to reconcile Jews (through recognition of Jesus as the Messiah)

with the God who has forgotten them,⁷⁹ and the understanding that such reconciliation will never come, leading to genocidal logic.⁸⁰

A failure of understanding lies at the heart of the tragedy recounted in the Gospels, involving three sides: the Jews, Jesus' Jewish supporters, and the Romans. The signifier "Jew" hardly appears in the Gospels, and is only used by the Romans, which underscores the fact that the interaction was actually between two groups: one internal (the Jews) and the other external (the Romans), with the designation "King of the Jews," the focus of the drama, emanating from the external group. The Passion may also be read as a comedy, since it is in the nature of the act of speech and writing to be open to interpretation.⁸¹ What the Romans (like Isaac Kumer) understood as a joke, the Jews treated with deadly seriousness: "King of the Jews" implies a blasphemous rejection of monotheism.

A misunderstanding lies at the heart of the tensions between Jews and Christians, which also brings us to the identification of Jews with dogness. The eleventh-century theologian Peter the Venerable doubted Jews' humanness and compared them to animals, because they were incapable of reason. In support of this idea, he cited Psalm 49, in which the foolish are likened to beasts, as well as Isaiah 6 ("Hear indeed, but do not understand"), leading to despair of Jewish understanding and to his contempt for the Talmud.⁸² Although hardly mentioned by Confino, the Talmud featured prominently alongside the Bible in Nazi expressions of hatred, as in the insult "Talmud crook" (*Talmud Gauner*), written on many Jewish businesses and used by Hermann Göring in his speeches. The identification of a lack of textual understanding with human baseness, typically in terms of animality and especially dogness, was fully realized by Luther who, in his early writings, had criticized the Church for doing just that, but ultimately fully embraced the idea.⁸³ The Talmud was a marker not only of a lack of understanding, but also of fanaticism. "Senseless hatred" (*sin'at hinam*), the reason cited in Jewish tradition for the destruction of the Temple, became a leitmotiv in Christian historiography, in connection with the rabbinical establishment's hatred toward Jesus. The two are related: misunderstanding leads to fanaticism, and both pertain to a concept of great importance in Christianity, truth, for which the dog in *Tmol shilshom* searches, in the belief that it lies in Isaac, the source of his calamity.

In the Gospel of John, we find Jesus' famous reply to the Roman governor's question, regarding his kingship: "You say that I am a king. To this end I was born, and for this cause I came into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (John 18:37). When Pilate asks him what that truth is, Jesus leaves him without an answer, just as Balak ultimately comes up against Kumer's flesh and blood, which is no different from that of any other creature. First, however, he seeks the truth in the written word:

At that moment, all his suffering was naught compared to the search for truth. And once again he turned his head back to see what were those signs and what was that truth.⁸⁴ But all his pains were in vain because he couldn't read. He was amazed and stunned, Everyone who sees me knows the truth about me, and I, who possess the truth itself, I don't know what it is.⁸⁵

His search takes him to the Alliance Israélite school. The principal (who is mocked in the novel, as are the secular schools in general) reads the Hebrew letters on the dog's skin from left to right, as he is accustomed, giving the dog his name, Balak. As in the case of Jesus, it is a comedy of errors, resulting above all from the fact that the object of inquiry—the body of the dog in *Tmol shilshom* and the truth witnessed by the body of the Messiah in the Gospel of John—does not afford access to understanding.

Without access to the truth, the body of the Messiah became one of the focal points of Christian theology, which views the crucifixion as an act of atonement for the sins of the faithful. According to Matthew, the Jews took responsibility for the crucifixion in the "blood curse": "Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25). Balak violates the Christian-messianic rationale by rising up against his maker and biting him back, although the concept of atonement may be intimated in the arrival of the long-awaited rains after Isaac's death. The ethical dimension of atonement found an alternative rationale of reciprocity. It thus comes as no surprise that Balak loves to eat the leftovers of the "Kapores" chickens on the eve of the Day of Atonement, especially since this is one of the explanations offered by the Gentile sages:

He sat down and wrote, It is a simple custom in Jerusalem, and no doubt throughout Palestine that the Jews write on the skin of dogs in the Hebrew language and in block letters: Crazy Dog. This seems to be done as a form of a “placatory act,” that is, someone who has a crazy person in his house goes and catches a white dog and writes on his skin, as those Jews do on the eve of their Day of Atonement with chickens, which they twirl over their head and say, This is my atonement this is my exchange.⁸⁶

Besides atonement, it is clear that *Tmol shilshom's* narrative is also about retribution, a prevalent aspect in Palestinian and later Israeli politics. Balak—the passive object of atonement, the body of the animal, whose colonial subjugation should solidify Jewish masculinity—ultimately exacts revenge, following the logic of an eye for an eye.

According to René Girard, revenge is the outcome of mimesis, the respective imitation of each side's fatal deeds. In antiquity, it was the act of sacrificing an animal that lay at the core of the sublimation of such vicious circles. Christianity's narrative of the sacrificial act of the guiltless (Jesus) was revolutionary because it broke the circle.⁸⁷ Balak's guiltless body shares that and sheds light on the violent discrepancy between discourse and body, at once delineating the figure of the Jew in European culture and avenging its calamities.

Writing ultimately points to the body—matter that negates interpretation and remains matter, by which animality becomes a symbol of the subaltern or colonial subject facing the nation. Such radical particularism should come as no surprise, as it has been at the heart of the Jewish-Christian conflict since Paul's Epistles. Paul attempted to universalize the Jew, redeeming the Jewish signifier from the radical difference it expressed in its affinity to body and ethnicity, with circumcision and biological attribution to a Jewish mother.⁸⁸ From this identification with body and difference, Paul sought to create a unifying universal identity of sameness in the single body of the Messiah. The question of whether Judaism is a religion or a people, universal or particular, is the great question of Judaism, and Agnon would appear to have found a way to answer it. Hitlerism too, was part of western tendency to detach from and be disgusted by corporeality, while being

dissolved in the abstract body of the nation.⁸⁹ For Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, the connection to the body stands not only as a radical signifier of alterity (which is what creates the chosenness of the Jewish people), but it is also what stands against the connection to territory and sovereignty. The analogy between Jews and dogs served the Catholic differentiation of “carnal Israel” from Christianity, which replaced it with the spirit.⁹⁰ This is also the essence of Shylock’s famous words, “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions . . .” (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 3 scene 1). The choice of the figure of the sick-man-dog was, for Agnon, an extraordinary way of contending with the violence of body and writing, which also have the potential for tolerance, to the extent that they preserve their radical alterity against sovereignty, because if they fail to do so, Jewish identity will become racism. Isaac’s dogness and failure of establishing a “state of equanimity,” which we understand as sovereignty, is exactly what prevents him from taking an active part in the history of the nation and its inherent racism.

DEDICATION

to Yizi

Berlin, 2020

NOTES

1. The preparation and publication of this article was made possible by a grant from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.
2. Zaban, “*Neged Agnon. O: Zebu ha-matza shel ha-Bayit ha-Yehudi*” [Against Agnon. Or: This is the Platform of the Jewish Home Party], March 24, 2017. Ten years before him, Uri Cohen also criticized Agnon scholarship for focusing almost entirely on “philological research into the religious origins of Agnon’s textuality.” Cohen, “Death and Modernism in S.Y. Agnon’s *A Guest for the Night*,” 670.
3. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, 33.
4. Cohen, “Only Yesterday: A Hebrew Dog and Colonial Dynamics in Pre-Mandate Palestine,” 160. It should be borne in mind that the Palestinians perceived Ottoman rule in colonial terms, strengthening Cohen’s thesis.

5. Arbell, *Katuv al oro shel kelev: Al tfisat ha-yetzirah etzel S. Y. Agnon* [Written on the Dog's Skin: S.Y Agnon's Concepts of Creativity and Art], 118–19.
6. Arbell, 228.
7. Arbell, 230–31.
8. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 286.
9. Agnon, 286–87.
10. In the original, the word *himud* (lust) is used. Throughout *Shira*, the word *curiosity* serves as a synonym for *desire*. See Agnon, *Shira*, 239–41.
11. See, for example, Tigy, *The JPS Torah Commentary for Deuteronomy*, 216. I thank Netanel Olhoeft for his help in finding these resources. In his interpretation to *Tmol shishom*, Amos Oz related to the characters of dogs in the novel as a substitute for women and saw in the act of writing on the dog a form of sexual intercourse, what supports the potential of Arbell's reading. See Oz, *Shtikat hashamayim*, 182. In his famous letter to Baruch Kurzweil, when addressing Balak's opacity, Agnon briefly mentions the Talmud (BT *Sotah* 3b), which relates to sins made in this world that accompany man to the World-to-Come like a dog that accompanies its owner. The Torah phrase on which the Talmud is based comes from the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:10), which clearly paints the discussion about transgression with the idea of feminine lust. Those are clearly the main over or undertones Agnon wanted for his great mysterious novel. The root ZHK, of Isaac's name and behavior with the dog, has sexual connotations in the Bible, and again, most explicitly in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife where she slanders the young servant who tried to sleep with his lady with the verb *letsabek* (see verse 14 and 17). In Arabic the root SHK uses today to denote promiscuous sexual relations among women.
12. The narrator immediately points out his error, informing the reader of a precedent for his action.
13. Bonfil, "The Devil and the Jews in the Christian Consciousness of the Middle Ages," 98.
14. See also Confino, *A World Without Jews*, 128. The word *Jude* (Jew) on the Nazi badge was written in pseudo-Hebrew lettering, similar to the Hebrew calligraphy used on Agnon's dog.
15. See also Hofman and Lowy's discussions on the theme of excommunication in the novel. Hofman addresses the textual force of the inscription on the dog's

- skin as a resistance to any form of interpretative coarseness, and Lowy uses the theory of speech act of John Searle (and not of Austin). Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S.Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing*, 131–32; Hasak-Lowy, “A Mad Dog’s Attack on Secularized Hebrew: Rethinking Agnon’s *Tmol shishom*,” 167–98.
16. One sort of violence is language’s endeavor of naming *too well*, which by maximal identification between signifier and signified risks forgetting the attachment and plurality between signifiers and other signifiers. See Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 73.
 17. Agnon first addressed the idea of the biopolitical apparatus and man as an abandoned body (through lack of “name and remnant”) in his early story *Ve-bayah be-akov le-mishor* [*And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*] (1912), which was a huge success as soon as it came out. See Ben-Yehuda, *Mah a’idkha: P’éulot dibur be-khitvei Franz Kafka ve-S. Y. Agnon*.
 18. See Stow, *Jewish Dogs: An Image and Its Interpreters*. A full account of this bloody genealogy delineate the coupling of dogs and Muslims as well, as part of the same antisemitic imagination. See Elliott Horowitz, “Circumcised Dogs from Matthew to Marlowe,” 531–45 (review essay). The aim of my reading is to unravel the colonial resonance implied in Jewish-Christian relations, and the Muslim and even Palestinian elements it entails. Jens Hanssen’s reading of Kafka’s complex position (facing antisemitic discourse on the one hand, and western/Zionist orientalism on the other) in his animalistic stories, and especially in “Jackals and Arabs” (1917), is also worth bearing in mind: Hanssen, “Kafka and Arabs,” 187.
 19. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive. Homo Sacer III*.
 20. Corngold, *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form*, 56–57.
 21. *The Metamorphosis* is one of the literary works most closely identified with the tendency to see Kafka as a prophet of the Holocaust, although it describes relations within the family. See, for example, Langer’s criticism of Adorno’s interpretation of Kafka, and particularly *The Metamorphosis: Langer, Admitting the Holocaust*, 123.
 22. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 286.
 23. Arbell, *Katuv al oro shel kelev*, 231.
 24. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 287.

25. It is worth mentioning the recently acclaimed Italian film *Dog-man* (Italy, 2018), directed by Matteo Garrone, which tells the story of the dog groomer Marcello and his love-hate relationship with his bully friend Simone. Like *Tmol shilshom*, the film addresses masculinity by the question of the canine, and like the novel, it depicts a relationship that turns to violence and revenge on the backdrop of mutual and repressed homoeroticism. Projecting his relationship with his dogs, the tamed Marcello is able to constitute his masculinity only by way of taming his friend what leads eventually to murder. Another acclaimed work in contemporary Israeli literature, the novel *Donkey* (2019) by Sami Berdugo (who won for it the Prestigious Sapir Prize) tells the story of Rosslan, who resemble in many ways Kumer. Rosslan is also an immigrant (to the State of Israel of the eighties), and he is also a passive figure that searches for purpose (see Berdugo, 117 and 240–41), in a novel that is very much aware to national questions of belonging and fulfillment. He creates a very intimate and sensual relation with a donkey that he takes care of in his modest yard, and the narrator relate to always as “Donkey,” an indefinite that becomes a proper name. Unlike *Tmol shilshom*, *Donkey* depicts a triangle around the question of the animal, manhood, and passivity, because into the silent and tender eroticism between Rosslan and Donkey (70–72, 240), bursts Rosslan’s Jewish-American lover Silverman and stands in opposition to their mutual passivity. Unlike the violence in *Tmol shilshom*, where Kumer kicks Balak who bites him in return, in this story both Rosslan and Donkey share their wounded bodies in concealment from Stilman who represents the harsh, penetrative, and even coercive side of outside (127–28).
26. Agnon, 288.
27. Elsewhere, I have tried to make a more general assertion about Jewish literature as “vertical” literature, based on Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s famous parable “Before the Law.” In the doorkeeper’s developing movement of bending over the man from the country, who becomes progressively smaller, Derrida sees a repression by the upper body of the lower body, which it cannot smell. It is thus the physical presence of the head and nose in the upper part of the body that establishes the sense of decency. See Ben-Yehuda, *Mah a’idkha*; Jacques Derrida, “Préjugés: Devant la loi,” 135. Freud was also aware of this when suggesting that the deepest root of sexual repression is the organic defense that comes from man’s erect gait. Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, 57–145, originally

- published 1930, 99n, 106n. Agnon returned repeatedly, almost obsessively, to the verse “The heavens are heavens for the Lord, and the earth He has given to human kind” (Psalms 115:16; trans. R. Alter), devoting his most complex theological story, *Hadam ve-khise* [Footstool and Throne], to this verticality, which also reflects Kafka’s parable, in which a man from the country waits to enter into the law, while sited for his entire life on a stool.
28. Miron, “*Bein shtei neshamot: Ha-Analogyah ha-Faustit be-‘Tmol shilshom’ le-S. Y. Agnon*” [Between Two Souls: The Faustian Analogy in S. Y. Agnon’s *Only Yesterday*], 604.
 29. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 624. My italics.
 30. See also Hadad’s theoretical discussion, *Mi she-oseh siman: Kri’ah semiyotit bi-‘Tmol shilshom’ me-et S. Y. Agnon* [The Sign Maker], 56.
 31. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 629.
 32. Agnon, 626–30.
 33. Agnon, 635.
 34. Agnon, 635.
 35. Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 25–35. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 630–31.
 36. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 630–31.
 37. For more on this, see my article on Bialik and Rabelais: Ben-Yehuda, “*Hiperbolot ve-hefgen: Al kamah aluziyot shel Bialik le-atzmo*” [Between Bialik and Himself: Acting Hyperbole Out].
 38. Arbell, “*Shirat ha-yam: Al ‘Shvu’at emunim’ u-‘Bi-Levav yamim* [The Song of the Sea: On *Betrothed* and *In the Heart of the Seas*], 231.
 39. Agnon, *Betrothed*, in *Two Tales by S. Y. Agnon: Betrothed and Edo and Enam*, 90.
 40. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 631–32.
 41. Agnon, 632.
 42. Miron, *Bein shtei neshamot*, 604.
 43. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 450–51.
 44. Ella Shohat cites a similar example of opposition by the Muslim community to the tendency among Jews to shave their beards in order to appear more western. These are striking examples of the confusion created by national discourse today. Like in *Tmol shilshom*, this too is a misunderstanding that led many to perceive the Muslim outcry as an expression of antisemitism. See also my reading of Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist,” in which I emphasize the colonial aspects of

- the question of nationalism and gender in Jewish literature. Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, 343; Ben Yehuda, "Kafka's Muslim: The Politics of Semitism."
45. Agnon, *Shira*, 287. See Hirschfeld, "Et Shirah lo areh lekha': Al siyumo shel 'Shirah'" [Reading a Torso: On the End in *Shira*], 151.
46. Agnon, *Shira*, 447.
47. Agnon, 112–14. The world of non-Jewish nobility is highly sexualized in Agnon's writings. Nowhere is this more explicit than in the story "Ha-Ne'elam" ["Disappeared"], published in the *Ir u-mlo'ah* [*A City in Its Fullness*] volume, in which a Polish noblewoman holds a Jewish former soldier captive and dresses him in women's clothing. It is my contention that Herbst's anxiety manifests itself in *Shira*, because his desire is not directed at a single object (like the dog in *Tmol shilshom*), but is divided among a number of objects. While in *Tmol shilshom*, there is the erotic contact of writing and biting, Herbst's character expresses an acute situation of anxious thinking: the anxiety manifests itself opposite the heteronormative imperative and is recognizable in the alienation that Herbst feels not only toward flesh, blood, and sexuality (in the form of femininity and leprosy), but also toward Mizrahim and children. *Shira* is, without a doubt, a novel that raises essential questions in cultural studies. See Ben-Yehuda, *Lo Areh Lekha': Al krisat hamesaper basifrut hayehudit hamodernit* [The Collapse of Storytelling in Modern Jewish Literature], 63–94.
48. That has to do both with de Haan's homosexuality and his non-Zionist beliefs. Agnon, *Esterlein yekirati: Mikhtavim tarpad-tartza*, 94.
49. This is the place to refer shortly to the known idea of "Jewish self-hatred," prevalent throughout the history of European Jewry in the modern era and especially pertinent to the age of nationalism and the creation of the "new Jew." This is probably a direction that needs a reading of its own in *Tmol shilshom*, but if Isaac's act is that of projecting his own dogness on a creature outside, one must recall here one of the first formulations of Jewish self-hatred as a projection, in Otto Weininger's words: "whoever detest the Jewish disposition detest it first of all in himself; that he should persecute it in others is merely his endeavour to separate himself from Jewishness; he strives to shake it off and localize it in his fellow-creatures, and so for a moment to dream himself free of it." See entire quote and discussion in Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and*

the Hidden Language of the Jews, 294. In his famous attack on auto-antisemitism in Zionist literature, the great biblical scholar Yehezkel Kaufman sites examples from Frischmann, Berdyczewski, Brenner, Gordon, and others, who all referred to the lives of Jews as the “lives of Dogs.” See especially endnote 4 in Kaufman, “*ḥurban ha-nefesh*,” *Moznayim*, 188. It is interesting to recall a famous quote from Theodor Lessing’s *Der jüdische Selbsthass*, which was published in 1930, and shows of the dynamic relations between men and dogs in the form of conduct, habitus or performance: “Denn um Menschen in Hunde zu wandeln, braucht man nur lange genug ihnen zuzurufen: ‘Du Hund!’” (Lessing, 17; in order to transform humans to dogs, all you need is to yell at them long enough “you dog!”).

50. DeKoven Ezrahi, “Sentient Dogs, Liberated Rams, and Talking Asses: Agnon’s Biblical Zoo or *Rereading Tmol Shilshom*,” 105–35.
51. Agnon to Baruch Kurzweil, January 18, 1946, in *Kurzweil-Agnon-Azag: Hilufei igrot* [Kurzweil, Agnon, Azag: Correspondence].
52. See how Galili Shahar understands literariness, the act of interpretation and the overabundance of writing, specifically in relation to Balak, as a consequence of the outcast body: Shahar, *Gufim ve- shemot: Kri’ot be-sifrut Yehudit ḥadashah* [Bodies and Names: Readings in Modern Jewish Literature], 153.
53. Ariel Hirschfeld recently addressed this topic at a conference in memory of Gershon Shaked (Hebrew University, December 2016). In his remarks, Hirschfeld defined Balak as destructive threat to art.
54. Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, 5.
55. Calarco, 6.
56. Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals*, 100. Benjamin’s analysis is based primarily on a comparison between *The Philosophy of Nature* and *The Philosophy of Right*.
57. Benjamin, 103–5. See also Alon Hilu’s remarks on the fate of Balak: “The dog becomes a victim of its own alterity, condemned to hunger, filth, and eternal wandering, and not surprisingly sinks to the depths of paranoid fears, somewhat Jewish in their neuroticism: ‘Every ripple and trace of a ripple would wander into his ears and hum like a military drum and stir his soul and he would bob up and down like a Cantor’s Adam’s apple.’” Hilu, “*Sipuro shel kelev shahid: Kri’ah post-kolonialistit be-‘Tmol shilshom’ me’et S. Y. Agnon*” [A Story of a Shahid Dog: A Post-colonialist Reading of *Only Yesterday* by S. Y. Agnon], 54–66.

58. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.
59. Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals*, 106.
60. Benjamin, 122.
61. See Ben-Yehuda, *Mah a' idkha*.
62. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 498. See Tochner, *Pesher Agnon* [The Meaning of Agnon], 92. It is important to mention here two thorough studies devoted to animals in Jewish literatures that were published recently. Both focus primarily not necessarily on the presence or depiction of animals in Hebrew and German literatures, nor on processes of anthropomorphism in their representations, but more on the relation of the text to the animal body that suggest, after Agamben, a reminiscence of the biopolitical dimensions of man. Noam Pines deals mostly with Hebrew and German literatures and offers, like in animality, another way for understanding the continuity between man and animal, suggested in what he dubs "Infra" (meaning under-, sub-)-human, and illuminates how these narratives shift our understanding from that of murder or suicide into that of slaughtering. Jay Geller devotes his work to German literature and focuses especially on Kafka, where he delineates carefully a differentiation between "the Jew-Animal," which is the traditional representations of Jews in European representations, and "the Jew as Animal," which is the way Kafka and others problematize this symbol in order to prevent a simplistic "homologization of Jews and mice," to use the most prevalent associations of Jews in German imagination (surprisingly, and so I argue, not the very common canine identifications among Jews themselves). Both works relate extensively to the Jewish Question in Europe, its reckoning with the nation, and who is entitled to take part in its citizenship. See Pines, *The Infrabuman: Animality in Modern Jewish Literature*, 40, 120; Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum: Unnatural Histories of the Jews*, 76.
63. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 20.
64. Hadad, *Mi she-oseh siman*, 56. Hadad writes that this opinion is "unequivocal," although it should be noted that it is only unequivocal among the Jews. The Christians like Balak throughout the novel, and their neighborhoods in Jerusalem, are his primary place of refuge.
65. Hilu, "*Sipuro shel kelev shahid*," 56.
66. It is also worth remembering that the AIDS virus too is a result of colonial

policies in Africa in the twentieth century. The HIV virus originated in monkeys in Africa, and appears to have crossed to humans in the sexually promiscuous environment of colonial cities in the early twentieth century (it is estimated, for example, that in 1928, in the city Leopoldville [later Kinshasa], some 45 percent of all women engaged in prostitution). See Dinis de Sousa, Lemey, and Vandamme, “High GUD Incidence in the Early 20th Century Created a Particularly Permissive Time Window for the Origin and Initial Spread of Epidemic HIV Strains.”

67. Hilu, “*Sipuro shel kelev shahid*,” 62. Hilu relates to Fanon’s observations regarding the discourse of the colonizer, which uses animals to describe the colonized, although Fanon himself—as one who related to himself as well as his patients (Fanon was a psychiatrist in Algeria)—should also be read through the lens of this conscious objectivization of the anatomy of the body, with its taut muscles, ready to resist. The connection (or lack of connection) between this body and language and writing should also be further scrutinized.
68. Halahmi, “*Al meshihim u-kblavim be-‘Tmol shilshom’ o: Ha-Pasyon al pi Agnon*” [On Messiahs and Dogs in *Tmol shilshom* or: The Passion According to Agnon], 152–53.
69. Halahmi, 156.
70. Halahmi, 153.
71. Agnon was very much aware of publications in German literature, and “Mindernickel” was most likely an influence on his Yitzhak Kummer, as the Hebrew translation of the story was published in 1929 in *Moznayim* (pp. 4–7) by Y.L. Baruch, who was a friend of Agnon in his time in Bad Homburg. A recent study of *Tmol shilshom* also shows its affinities with postcolonial depictions (in works by J. M. Coetzee and H. Manto) of the dog as a quintessential part of the degraded human subject: Grinberg and Ashkenazi, “Who Let the Mad Dog Out? Trauma and Colonialism in the Hebrew Canon,” 101. Thomas Mann’s oeuvre generally dealt with the idea that Foucault defined as “the latency of sexuality,” so pertinent to homosexual desires and colonial repression, current especially in his famous *Death in Venice* (1912): Tobin, *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex*, 198, 203.
72. Schmidt, *Die Matthaeus Passion von Johann Sebastian Bach: Zur Geschichte ihrer religioesen und politischen Wahrnehmung und Wirkung*, 201.

73. Confino, *A World Without Jews*, 99.
74. For various descriptions of the Jewish crowd in *Tmol shilshom*, see Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 320–23: “And all the children of Israel were shouting at him, Shaygets, Shameless, Arrogant, We’ll uproot you. . . . At that moment, the whole audience was shaken. If you turn this way, woe, if you turn that way, alas. . . . But in the morning, when the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He lights up His world and they see you, they’ll come against you with sticks and stones.” Similarly, it is in a staccato fugue of shouts and interjections that Bach’s Jewish mob presents its demand to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate: “Away away with Him crucify Him” (*Weg weg mit dem, kreuzige ihn!*).
75. Confino quotes Joseph Roth directly: “By destroying the Jews they are persecuting Christ” (in Confino, *A World Without Jews*, 54). For carnivalesque manifestations, the most extreme embodiment of which was the burning of the Bible, see Confino 84, 121–22.
76. Confino 122.
77. Confino, 88.
78. Chazan, *From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism: Ancient and Medieval Christian Constructions of Jewish History*, 118.
79. This idea began with Paul, and it is what lies behind the systematic Christian study of the Old Testament, the Talmud, and the Hebrew language. See Chazan, 87.
80. I refer to “genocidal logic” because genocide is not merely a matter of practice, but also of motivation and potential. The expressions of despair uttered by the Church Fathers led to violent solutions, the most extreme of which was Martin Luther’s denunciation of the Jews, after having tried unsuccessfully to show them the true path. It is no coincidence that in his later writings, in which he expressed burning hatred for the Jews, Luther showed an intense interest in the crucifixion itself. He rejected the Augustinian argument for the preservation of the Jews, and expressed views that would have been entirely consistent with Nazi rhetoric. It is surprising that neither Confino nor Chazan, in their respective fields, pay much attention to these grave connections. See Chazan, 213, 226, 231, 246. The distinction between anti-Judaism, which is more theological and suggests assimilation of the Jews in Christendom (meaning humanity) and antisemitism, which suggest ethnical difference that could only be dissolved by genocide, is important because the animal, like the Jew, stays unyielding to the process of universalization. David

Nirenberg's magnum opus shows how European imagination has tried to cope with this kind of unyielding from the church fathers (and in fact even earlier in the ancient world of Egypt and Greece) right until modern thought and the enlightenment. See Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The History of a Way of Thinking*.

81. This takes us back to the beginning of the article and Judith Butler's assertion that discourse may have an impact even when there is a misunderstanding and there is no correlation between it and the subject. This is the essence of the power of performance in general: it is always open to interpretation and therefore to a lack of agreement as to its meaning, ranging from comedy to tragedy, from seriousness to laughter. See also Shoshana Felman's development of J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts: Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, 65–66.
82. Chazan, *From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism*, 130–31.
83. Chazan, 213.
84. It is intriguing to mention that the truth is part of Maimonides understanding of Pirkei Avot 5/22 that says about the Tora: "turn it and turn it again, for all is in it," because the movement of relentless turning around is the main bodily gesture of Balak, who seeks to understand the truth, that is, the scripture on his skin.
85. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 303. The ritual slaughter Rebbe Alter takes a different view of truth, which he identifies with mercy: Agnon, 581.
86. Agnon, 489.
87. See for example Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre (2007)*.
88. Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," 697.
89. Boyarin, 706.
90. Stow, *Jewish Dogs*, 35.

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