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# Horizontal or Vertical: Rereading the Space Scheme in *Only Yesterday* by S. Y. Agnon

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**Abstract:** *Since its publication in 1945, scholarly works on S. Y. Agnon's* Only Yesterday (Temol shilshom) *have focused on various thematic and poetic aspects of the novel, such as the structure of the plot, the protagonist Isaac Kumer, and the moral and poetic meanings of the novel's ending. Inter alia, scholars have been interested in the geographical spaces presented in the plot, and the protagonist's indecision of whether to settle in Jaffa or Jerusalem, two cities that offer contrasting ways of living. This article offers a new reading of the novel's space scheme in tandem with an analysis of the short story, "The Mines of Falun," by E. T. A. Hoffman, with which Agnon was familiar, and thus sheds a different light on Kumer's unexpected death at the novel's end. A comparative study of Agnon's and Hoffman's works reveals a similar space scheme that does not emphasize the contrast between two different cities—Jerusalem and Jaffa—but focuses on a single highly significant urban setting—Jerusalem. In* Only Yesterday *the main conflict is actually between a heavenly Jerusalem and an earthly Jerusalem (Jerusalem of above and below), and not between Jerusalem and Jaffa. Concentrating interest on Jerusalem itself turns the discussion of the novel to the nature of Jewish life in the Land of Israel, an issue that was of great concern to Agnon.*

## Double axes: the vertical versus the horizontal

Since its publication in 1945, numerous studies have been written on S. Y. Agnon's novel *Only Yesterday* (*Temol shilshom*),[1] focusing on aspects such as plot structure; the protagonist Isaac Kumer's attitude towards Zionism, the way he relates to people, and his love affairs; the figure of the demon dog Balak who bites Isaac and causes his death; the moral and poetic meaning of the novel's ending; the historical period of the Second Aliyah,[2] in which the plot takes place, and more.[3] The nature of space and the location of the events are also

1. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. by Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

2. The Second Aliyah was the second wave of immigration of Jews from eastern Europe to Palestine, which took place between 1904 and 1914. It is considered highly influential in the development of Jewish land settlement.

3. These studies appear in Hebrew books and journals. Below is a list of selected studies listed chronologically: Avraham Band, "Ha-ḥet ve-ʿonsho be-*Temol shilshom*," *Molad* 1, no. 1 (1967): 75–80; Meshulam Tukhner, "Giboro shel *Temol shilshom*," in *Pesher ʻAgnon*, ed. Israel Cohen (Ramat Gan: ʼAgudat Hasofrim, 1968), 62–72; Nitza Ben-Dov, "'Lo Yaʿakov shimkha?,' Kelev meshugaʻa ve-shigoʻon ha-bikkoret," in *ʼAhavot lo meʼusharot* (Tel Aviv: ʻAm ʻOved, 1997), 355–376, 377–380; Boaz Arpaly, *Rav-roman: Ḥamishah maʼamarim ʻal* Temol shilshom *shel S. Y. Agnon* (Tel



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points of interest to *Only Yesterday* scholars, who often claim that the significance of the novel is to be found in the dilemma and confrontation between Zionism and religiosity, as represented by two cities, Jaffa and Jerusalem, respectively.[4] A different reading of the story, in tandem with E. T. A. Hoffman's short story "The Mines of Falun," not only decentralizes the conflict between the two cities and what they represent, but also shifts the thematic focus to the city of Jerusalem itself. There the nature of religious Jewish life on the land in its various forms becomes the novel's central question. In *Only Yesterday* the main conflict is actually between a heavenly Jerusalem and an earthly Jerusalem (Jerusalem of above and below).

*Only Yesterday* tells the story of Isaac Kumer, a young Jewish man, and his misadventures when he emigrates with the Second Aliyah from Galicia in eastern Europe[5] to Palestine, to become a pioneer who works the land and revives Hebrew culture. During this move, he also tries to shape a new identity as a more confident young man, integrating a greater sense of the masculine and the erotic. He leaves his father and brothers in Galicia and arrives in the Land of Israel to fulfill Zionist ideals, but unfortunately his attempts at procuring work as a field laborer fail because the landlords at the *moshavah*[6] prefer to employ experienced Arab laborers. He then settles in Jaffa, works as a house painter, and befriends one Rabinovitch and his girlfriend, Sonya. When Rabinovitch returns to Europe, Sonya and Kumer become a couple. This love affair fails because Sonya is a modern, independent, and liberal young woman. Kumer then moves between Jaffa and Jerusalem, two cities that represent opposing and distinct lifestyles, norms, and ideologies. Finally settling in Me'ah She'arim, the ultra-pious Jerusalem neighborhood,[7] Kumer pairs up with an Orthodox woman, Shifrah. One day while working

Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me'uḥad, 1988); Ariel Hirschfeld, "'Ivut ha-merḥav be-groteskah be-*Temol shilshom* le-Shai 'Agnon," *Meḥkarei Yerushalayim be-sifrut 'Ivrit* 1 (1981): 49–5; Gershon Shaked, "*Temol shilshom*—Diyokano shel ha-ḥaluẓ ke-korban," in *Ha-siporet ha-'Ivrit 1880–1890* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Keter and Ha-kibbutz Ha-me'uḥad, 1983), 206–209; Amos Oz, "Shtikah ve-yatmut goral," in *Shtikat ha-shamayim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993), 73–219; Michal Arbel, "*Temol shilshom*: Ha-ktav 'al 'oro shel ha-kelev," in *Katuv 'al 'oro shel ha-kelev* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2006), 154–198; Dan Miron, "Bein shtei neshamot: Ha-'analogiyah ha-Fa'ustit be-*Temol shilshom* le-Shai 'Agnon," in *Me-Vilna le-Yerushalayim*, ed. Asaf David and Shmuel Verses (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006), 549–608; Adia Mendelson Maoz, "'Akedato shel Yiẓḥak," in *Ha-sifrut ke-ma'abadah musarit* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010), 187–201.

4. For example: Miron, "Bein shtei neshamot," 604; Adi Ẓemach, "Ha-regel ha-metukah," in *Kri'ah tamah ba-sifrut ha-'Ivrit ba-me'ah ha-'esrim* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1990), 25–39.

5. Galicia is a historical region in eastern Europe containing numerous Jewish communities. Currently it is divided between the Ukraine and Poland.

6. A *moshavah* is a farming community of private farms developed by the pioneers of the First Aliyah (1882–1903).

7. Me'ah She'arim is an old neighborhood in Jerusalem. It is an insular society composed of various ultra-Orthodox groups, some of whom are well known for their opposition to Zionism. They speak Yiddish in their daily lives and shun exposure to many aspects of contemporary society. The reason the neighborhood is named Me'ah She'arim, which means "one hundred gates" in Hebrew, is that it has hundreds of houses and courtyards, but the name also derives from the weekly biblical passage read when the neighborhood was founded. The particular biblical verse describes Isaac's



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as a painter, he encounters a stray dog named Balak, and paints an inscription on his back that reads: "mad dog" (*kelev meshuga'a*),[8] even though at that time the dog is not rabid. The dog, it turns out, has a developed consciousness and understanding, and in some of the novel's chapters, his first-person voice is presented. From that moment on, the dog is persecuted by the people of Me'ah She'arim, whose world is full of prejudices and superstitions. They hunt him, hit him, and exile him, believing that dogs, like Balak, are demonic symbols of danger and death. The dog was healthy when Kumer first met him, but it seems that the painted words of the inscription had supernatural powers. After the customary seven-day celebrations of Kumer's wedding are over, Balak bites him, and a short time after that Kumer dies.

The questions of why Kumer dies, and how he sinned to be punished so severely, have preoccupied many of the novel's scholars.[9] Some speculate that it was because he selfishly left his family behind in Galicia. Others claim his fall can be traced to his affair with Sonya, his betrayal of his friend Rabinovitch. Or perhaps his abuse of the dog, painting an inscription that brought about ostracism and his death, is his sin. There are other deeds that might be considered, though none of them can really justify Kumer's dreadful end.

Many scholars have also emphasized the space scheme of Jaffa-Jerusalem as a binary that symbolizes ideological values of Zionist pioneering versus an older model of religious life, two contrasting worlds that could not be combined. Interpreting this binary might suggest that Kumer died for betraying Zionist values by choosing Jerusalem over Jaffa—that it was an ideologically prompted death sentence.[10]

But a different reading is possible, a reading that may also shed light on Kumer's enigmatic death. In his theoretical study on the methods of space structures in narrative, Gabriel Zoran points to the topographic scheme as one of the important structures in literature.[11] Topographic relations between places or elements, he argues, are critical to interpretation and meaning. Zoran points out two dimensions—the horizontal and the vertical. While the horizontal usually

success and his agricultural yields: "Isaac sowed in that land, and in that year he reaped a hundredfold; God had blessed him" (Genesis 26:12). Meaning he is blessed in all he does.

8. I follow Todd Hasak-Lowy ("A Mad Dog's Attack on Secularized Hebrew: Rethinking Agnon's *Temol shilshom*," *Prooftexts* 24, no. 2 [2004]: 167–198) who prefers using the term "mad dog" for *kelev meshuga'a* and not "crazy dog" as Barbara Harshav uses in her translation of the novel into the English.

9. Following is a list of selected studies listed chronologically: Eliezer Schweid, "Kelev ḥuẓot ve-'adam—'iyyun be-*Temol shilshom*," *Molad* 16, no. 1 (1958): 381–388; Band, "Ha-ḥet ve-'onsho"; Shaked, "Diyokano shel ha-ḥaluẓ ke-korban"; Oz, "Shtikah ve-yatmut goral"; Arbel, "Ha-ktav 'al 'oro shel ha-kelev"; Maoz, "'Akedato shel Yiẓḥak"; Yigal Schwartz, "Mah she-ro'im mi-kan lo ro'im misham, 'aval gam le-heifekḥ: Siporet ha-'aliyah ha-shniyah mi-shtei perspektivot historiyot," in *Mah she-ro'im mi-kan* (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, 2005).

10. Arpaly, *Rav-roman*, chapter 2; Miron, "Bein shtei neshamot."

11. Gabriel Zoran, *Tekst, 'olam, merḥav* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me'uḥad, 1997).



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represents a defined and substantive place, the vertical mostly represents a world whose ontological existence is vague.[12]

Following Zoran's concept of space, Isaac's conflict may be viewed through a topographic space scheme of two axes. Jaffa is not simply situated in opposition to Jerusalem. Here there is more than a simple conflict between two actual cities that are topographically opposed to one another horizontally. In fact, the bifold nature of Jerusalem itself—the contrast between the heavenly Jerusalem and the earthly Jerusalem[13]—is the central vertical axis of the plot and key to the novel's underlying meaning. The vertical dichotomy of Jerusalem is indicated by the two Hebrew names given to the city, reflecting the upper and lower worlds: *Yerushalayim shel ma'alah*, Jerusalem of above, and *Yerushalayim shel matah,* Jerusalem of below. The novel's focus on Jerusalem itself orients the discussion on the nature of Jewish life in the Promised Land.[14]

The perception of horizontal and vertical dimensions, with a focus on the vertical, follows Zoran's analysis of E. T. A. Hoffman's short story, "The Mines of Falun." There a protagonist moves from one city to another, and though his conflict seems to be about how to choose between the two, Zoran argues that the essential conflict is actually the dilemma between life on top of the ground and the dark world of the mines below.[15] Agnon was apparently familiar with Hoffman's work, thus inviting a rereading of his *Only Yesterday* through the lens of "The Mines of Falun."

Hoffman's story is located in Sweden. It tells the plight of a young seaman, Elis Fröbom, who arrives in Götaburg, a harbor city filled with profligacy and licentiousness, a place where life is very permissive. It is a city of trade and

12. Zoran, *Tekst, 'olam, merḥav*, 310–313.

13. According to the Babylonian Talmud (Ta'anit 5a), there are two Jerusalems—the heavenly Jerusalem and the earthly Jerusalem, also named the terrestrial Jerusalem and celestial Jerusalem. The concept refers to Jerusalem's twofold character—the heavenly city that God built for himself and the earthly Jerusalem for the people of Israel. The earthly Jerusalem represents human existence, while the heavenly Jerusalem is the Divine Presence.

14. From a different perspective than is brought in this article, Dan Miron and Ariel Hirschfeld also pointed out the vertical nature of space in *Only Yesterday*, each from another angle. Miron argues that in many ways Goethe's *Faust* influenced Agnon's novel. He finds an analogy between Kumer's dream and Faust's famous monologue of the two souls within him—one who loves the world and clings to it with lust, while the other longs to soar above to the realm of the ancestors. This analogy, Miron believes, intended to stress Agnon's philosophy that the error of the Second Aliyah is manifested in Kumer's fiasco of trying to combine the two souls of the nation—Zionism and religion (Miron: "Bein shtei neshamot," 604). Hirschfeld is more specific about geographic space and its psychological effect. As Kumer approaches Jerusalem, the narrator's language becomes more figurative and dark, as if it is not only a transition of location but a strategic point in the plot. The space is not only horizontal anymore, it is also vertical and its measurements are huge. The earth is seen as a monster while the space above and the sky are sublime. Hirschfeld also finds a polyphonic Jerusalem sung in three voices (Hirschfeld, "'Ivut ha-merḥav be-groteskah," 51–52).

15. "The Mines of Falun" was first published in *Die Serapionsbrüder,* a four-volume collection of Hoffmann's novellas and fairytales that appeared in 1819, 1820, and 1821. Citation here refers to E. T. A. Hoffman, *Selected Works*, ed. and trans. L. J. Kent and E. C. Knight, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 189–212.



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commerce, where sailors arrive for short periods and seek the pleasures of drink and women. The city is characterized by quick satisfactions of appetite, and the concept of love is represented by Elis's encounter with a prostitute who comes to sit on a bench with him, where he also meets a mysterious old miner who invites him to move to Falun, the city of mines. Falun is characterized as the opposite of Götaburg. This is a city whose residents make their living from the hard work of slow digging in the mines, and where family life and strict values are dominant. Elis moves to Falun, becomes a miner, and grows to love the beautiful and virginal young Ulla, the daughter of Pehrson Dahlsjö, the owner of one of the mines. He becomes engaged to Ulla, but on his wedding day the mysterious old miner, who had appeared a few times in Elis's dreams and during work in the mines, appears again and tempts him to go down to the mines to find gemstones. This old miner is the legendary Torbern, the horrifying mythical figure who haunts Falun's miners, and who was a miner himself, more than a hundred years earlier. Elis goes down to the mines and finds his death. His body is discovered in its entirety fifty years later, but as it is taken out from the mine to the ground above, it crumbles to dust.

In Hoffman's "The Mines of Falun" the protagonist's transition from one city, Götaburg, with a specific character, to another, Falun, with a different nature, seems a crucial shift from life to death, since this transition leads the protagonist to his death. Zoran's analysis, however, suggests a scheme that interprets the protagonist's movements differently. "The Mines of Falun," he argues, uses a sharp topographic scheme that is actually a well-known trope taken from romantic myths, itself based on ancient myth. In the beginning of the story it seems that the conflict lies in the horizontal dimension—where to live and how, and where to work—a conflict that seems resolved in Elis's transition from Götaburg to Falun, two cities distinguished by two opposing modes of existence. But the real conflict, argues Zoran, lies in the vertical dimension, in the contrast between the earth's surface above and the ground below, a conflict that also reveals itself in Elis's dream in which he is torn between the upper world of the living, the world on earth, and the frozen and static depths of the sea. The world above is described as dynamic and subject to change—people get old, things become worn out and crumble, while the sea depths are described as if time stands still, flora remains constant and living creatures have eternal life. In Elis's hallucination close to the end of the story, this verticality is present once again when he feels split in two—one part going down to the center of the earth while the other half remains on earth. Furthermore, the transformations in the horizontal dimension are normal—taking a job, falling in love, moving from one place to another, while the transitions in the vertical dimension are anomalous—mysterious happenings always related to catastrophe and death. While there are various interpretations of the story, Zoran suggests that this is in fact a story about madness, and specifically about the process of losing one's sanity.[16]

16. Zoran, *Tekst, 'olam, merḥav*, 310–316.



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"The Mines of Falun," according to Hoffman scholar Albert B. Smith, is an initiation and quest story in which the ancient pattern of going beneath the surface of the earth represents the exploration of the deepest self. In contemporary literature it still functions as a useful symbolic structure, with the modern variant of associating the descent with mining, as it appears in Hoffman's story. However, Hoffman, argues Smith, has his narrative deviate from the traditional pattern in which the protagonist comes to closure with a new insight. Instead, his protagonist dies at the site of his initiation. Here, the sharp antagonism between the surface world and the "other" reality underground is also represented by the contrast between the enduring world that Elis finds below, and attachments on the surface that prove to be transitory. The foremost difference is that the underworld is a place that speaks to a sense of aesthetics that gives value to Elis's life—the beauty of the fictive stones is much more appealing than real life.[17]

## The Heavenly and Earthly Jerusalem

Agnon was likely familiar with Hoffman's writings, since they were considered treasured works of German culture. And even if he were not familiar with this particular story, the romantic myth of descent into the underworld can be traced in Kumer's plight in Agnon's *Only Yesterday,* this time appearing in a Jewish cloak.

Following Zoran's reading of "The Mines of Falun," in a similar reading of the space scheme in *Only Yesterday*, Isaac's conflict can be viewed not horizontally but vertically; the "laboratory" in which Kumer is examined is ultimately Jerusalem. *Only Yesterday's* Jerusalem, argues Boaz Arpaly, is an inconsistent combination of the holy and the mundane. Heavenly Jerusalem is engaged through prayer—*niggun*[18]—and Bible study. It is a city with historic depth, where holiness and God's eternal spirit are present. On the other hand, the novel's earthly Jerusalem is intimidating—a city of graves, disease, poverty, and invalids. Indeed, secular life is also described, but the city's character is determined by the Old Yishuv.[19] Here quarrels regarding the *ḥalukah*, gossip, bans, and boycotts reign supreme and lives are lived according to petrified religious laws, untouched by progress.[20]

Isaac's vertical conflict is revealed in his dream, when he is divided in two, stuck between two building stories. His legs are in the lower story, while his head is in the upper. Some of *Only Yesterday*'s scholars interpret his dream to mean that Isaac is split between Jaffa and Jerusalem,[21] or between Zionism and religion.[22] It

17. Albert B. Smith, "Variations on a Mythical Theme: Hoffmann, Gautier, Queneau and the Imagery of Mining," *Neophilologus* 63, no. 2 (1979): 179–186.

18. A *niggun* is a vocal Jewish folk song. It sometimes has lyrics and sometimes only a melody, and is especially typical in the hasidic movement.

19. The Old Yishuv is the ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities that existed in Palestine before the first wave of Zionist immigration started in 1882. This is called so in contrast to the New Yishuv, the community based on Zionism and pioneering values. The Old Yishuv was religious and relied economically on donations from the Jewish Diaspora (called *ḥalukah).*

20. Arpaly, *Rav-roman*, 130.

21. Zemach, "Ha-regel ha-metukah," 34.

22. Miron, "Bein shtei neshamot," 604.



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could also be argued that Kumer's dream does not reflect the dilemma of Jaffa versus Jerusalem, but the conflict between two kinds of Jerusalem, the earthly *Yerushalayim shel matah,* symbolized by the lower story that represents Me'ah She'arim and its possessed, dark, fanatical world, while the upper story symbolizes heavenly Jerusalem, *Yerushalayim shel ma'alah*, beautiful Jerusalem, the imaginary city for which Jews have yearned for millennia, where tradition and religion exist in a manner that balances a rich spiritual life. Me'ah She'arim, as Hirschfeld indicates, brings Kumer down; it depletes his vitality. He is described as becoming nullified, a place where only his legs exist:

> The day burned liked an oven and the sun inflamed the whole world and the whole world was yellow and dry like the air that stands still between heaven and earth, and like the dust that sticks to a person's body and covers his eyes and fills his ears so much that he doesn't see and doesn't hear anything but a kind of mute humming that parches the soul and drowns him in boredom. With every single step, his strength wanes and his bones dry out and his tongue is dry as dust. Only his feet still trudge on. And so he trudged along behind his feet, until they brought him to Meah Shearim.[23]

In "The Mines of Falun," the vertical dimension takes over Elis's world when the mysterious ancient miner who belongs to the subterranean world charms him and brings him to his death on his wedding day. The old miner is revealed to Elis only, as is the mine's treasure. A similar circumstance happens to Kumer. Upon his arrival to Me'ah She'arim, a zone with its own rules of compliance, a series of events befall him, including the interaction with Balak, the demonic dog who will later cause his death. Balak is a mysterious creature. He is a stray who does not belong to anyone and suddenly appears out of nowhere. He is monstrous because of his human understanding and consciousness on the one hand, but naive on the other hand. His destructive power is in the eye of the beholder, in the eyes of the people of Me'ah She'arim who fear him. They are also afraid of Isaac, who painted the inscription "mad dog" on the dog's body, for his amusement supposedly, though it can be argued that Kumer was inspired by a creative unconscious seeking self-expression.

As has already been mentioned, Hoffman's "The Mines of Falun" can be read as a story that reveals how madness evolves and grows, and the potentially hazardous influence of aesthetics. Both Elis in Hoffman's work and Isaac in Agnon's are influenced by the power of aesthetics to equally affect the mind and soul of the one who creates, and the one who receives. Only Elis could see Torbern and the treasure of the mine. Going down to the depths to dig and to find what no one else could see, is actually going inside the subconscious, to one's repressed and darkest urges. The gems are the aesthetic trigger that arouses his madness. Torbern functions as an external representation of Elis's inner self.

23. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 209.



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Isaac Kumer also lost his sanity because of an aesthetic illusion. According to Michal Arbel, Kumer became mad because of the "unreal," meaning in relation to something fabricated and fictional (at least at first), the writing of the artistic inscription "mad dog" on Balak's body. By turning Balak into a living mobile performance piece, he creates a new composition. Now the dog is his artistic work, and being an artist is being at risk, being on the edge. Just as one cannot control the impact and interpretation of his art, likewise in the artistic work the repressed contents of the mind are embodied and exposed.[24] Nitza Ben-Dov has already pointed out that the status of Kumer's artistic inscription is the same as printed text—the moment it gets into circulation it gets out of control.[25] Isaac could not predict the way his little artistic deed would affect the dog and his surroundings, including the people of Jerusalem. Indeed it seems that Kumer is completely unaware of the full significance of his deed. Although he is proud of it, and believes that no one has done something like it before, the importance he gives to this act, in its "primitive" context, is connected to the earthly Jerusalem of "below," to the old mystical Jewish tradition: "Isaac looked at the dog and was happy. When our rabbis in the land of Israel excommunicated a person they would tie notes to the tails of black dogs saying So-and-So is excommunicated, and they would send the dogs throughout the city to warn the people to stay away from him. But never before had anyone written on the skin of a dog."[26] With the words painted on him, the dog Balak, not understanding the meaning of what has been done to him, makes his way straight to Me'ah She'arim, where the old traditional custom of a dog with a warning on him evokes shock and fear among the people.

Becoming rabid, Balak bites Kumer a week after his wedding, which leads to his death. The death of Hoffman's Elis is also tied in with his wedding. Balak is the representative of the dark world (an agent of the superstitions of the old Jewish tradition), but also, like Torbern, he is the representative of the dark depths of the mind and soul (Kumer's other persona).[27] Balak, who indeed contracted rabies after Kumer proclaimed he was mad, infects Kumer with the disease. When Kumer dies from rabies, the man and the dog become identified one with the other.

Balak, like Torbern, is a mysterious creature. His appearance brings the supernatural into the plot, and gives the story a folktale-like or surrealistic aura. The space in both of the stories—the mines where Elis works, and the streets and alleys of Jerusalem—is significant, but because of the folk-like nature of Hoffman's story, one has the impression that its mines are fictional, whereas in Agnon's story, the geography of Jerusalem is real and accurate. Besides the fact that Falun and Götaburg are two real cities in Sweden, one a port city and the other a city of mines, the most unexpected element is that the description of the

24. Arbel, *Katuv 'al 'oro*, 202.

25. Ben-Dov, *'Ahavot lo me'usharot*, 382.

26. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 287.

27. The significance and role of Balak in the novel have various interpretations in the study of *Only Yesterday*. For a comprehensive review of the various interpretations and discussion, see Arpaly, *Rav-roman*, 224–267.



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mines is very accurate, taken from a travel book by Hausmann.[28] Although the story is clearly nonrealistic, the geographic space is very real and can be verified.

*Only Yesterday* works differently. Until the reader meets Balak, it is clear that the story is rooted in a specific place and period. And when Balak takes over the story, the reader wanders around Jerusalem with him, not aware that the geographical descriptions of Jerusalem are partly inaccurate, and are more of an imagined space. According to Yossi Katz, Agnon's historical, geographical descriptions of Jerusalem cannot be used as an exact source for the urban setting.[29] Rather they give a sense of Jerusalem's spirit and milieu during that period, and provide an in-depth appraisal of events. The novel may give the impression that it is providing solid information, but actually a close examination indicates that this is not so. Agnon's Jerusalem, argues Katz, is described according to Agnon's moral and emotional attitude towards the city, which he believed to be the very essence of the Jewish nation.[30]

Kumer's death at the end of *Only Yesterday* has been interpreted in many ways by scholars trying to understand "why Isaac died." Some find the answer in the novel and some in contemporary historical events.[31] Kumer's chronicle includes many characteristics that are compatible with the figure of the predominant "rootless character" (*talush*) of Hebrew literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. Besides its ending, Kumer's story raises the same problematic issues exemplified by the rootless-character stories of Jewish young men who face a new harsh reality, first in Europe and later upon immigrating to Palestine. Their stories follow a similar trajectory: adopting new ideas, conflict between tradition and those new ideas, wandering from one place to another, erotic appetites, and shame when faced with failure to achieve either or both intellectual and erotic goals. Everything falls apart as objectives are almost reached. Yet the protagonist in these stories never dies. He is depressed and in distress, and even if he considers suicide, he never follows through.[32]

Contrary to expectation from the pattern of other rootless-character stories, Kumer dies. If Kumer had not died, might he have remained in Jerusalem, living among the people of the Old Yishuv, like Josef Landa, the rootless protagonist of Yehuda Ya'ari's Third Aliyah novel, *When the Candle Was Burning* (*Ke-'or yahel*,

28. Hoffman added a note to the description of the mine in Falun and its entrance, saying: "See the description of the great *pinge* at Falun in Hausmamann's *Journey through Scandinavia,* part 5, p. 96."

29. Yossi Katz, "Jerusalem in S. Y. Agnon's *Yesterday before Yesterday*," in *Writing the City*, ed. Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley (New York: Routledge, 1994), 205–218.

30. Katz, "Jerusalem," 209–215.

31. Agnon started *Only Yesterday* in 1930, but completed it in 1945. He wrote most of it during the years of the Second World War with awareness of the tragic fate of European Jewry.

32. There are a few examples of stories in which the rootless protagonist dies at the end, but they are few and far between. Two that come to mind are: Yiẓḥak Shenhar's protagonist in his story, "Israel-Ẓvi" (1940), published a few years before *Only Yesterday*, and Ya'akov Shabtai's protagonist, Goldman, in his novel *Past Continuous* (*Zikhron dvarim*, 1977). In Shenhar's tale the rootless protagonist is killed in an accident, a random death he did not deserve. Shabtai's protagonist commits suicide.



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1937)?[33] Why does Agnon not allow his protagonist to return to the old Jewish way of life? After all, many of Hebrew literature's rootless characters make a late return, indeed they seem doomed to fail outside of it, but their journeys do not end in death. Other secondary characters might die because of the *talush* or for his sake, but he himself survives and suffers. What would be the literary and philosophical value of keeping a rootless character alive by all means, even when he is willing to commit suicide from shame or pain? Besides the value of the sanctity of life that is transcendent and that Agnon upholds, the concept behind this pattern is to condemn the protagonist to live in agony for the rest of his life. His role is to keep the conflict alive and kicking. For this conflict, as it is in most of the rootless-character stories, is bound up with his Jewishness. It is a manifestation of the tension between keeping the old traditions alive while new ideologies and lifestyles beckon.

## The Old Jew / New Jew on the Land

Since *Only Yesterday*'s plot takes place during the Second Aliyah, it is only expected that it would be compared to Y. Ḥ. Brenner's work that deals with life in Palestine at that period,[34] and especially to Brenner's novel, *Mi-kan u-mi-kan* (From here and there, 1911).[35] Brenner was skeptical about the future of the settlement movement and its chances for success, because he was pessimistic about the Jewish people's ability to become farmers. He was wary of this Zionist ambition, and was even more pessimistic and critical regarding the Old Yishuv and its schnorrer—dependent—way of life. The question arises: what did Agnon seek to add to or detract from Brenner's perspective of the Second Aliyah as depicted in his numerous literary works?

Agnon's *Only Yesterday*, argues Yigal Schwartz, is a "period novel" in its generic type, considering the self-conscious ending of Kumer's adventures.[36] Kumer's death, argues Schwartz, breaks the bond between the fate of the individual and the fate of the collective and nation. Indeed the bountiful rain that begins to fall

33. Yehudah Ya'ari, *When the Candle Was Burning*, trans. Menachem Hurwitz (London: V. Gollancz, 1947).

34. Yosef Ḥayim Brenner, a Hebrew-language author, was born in Russia and immigrated to Palestine in 1909. In his writing he criticizes the Jewish Old Yishuv for its schnorrer (economically dependent) way of life, and the Jewish First Aliyah landlords, for becoming greedy and giving up so easily on the early pioneering ideology. Brenner believed that the Land of Israel was just another diaspora and no different from other diasporas. Still he was convinced that the Jewish people should remain in one place and take root, and therefore despite his misgivings, he supported Zionism.

35. The first person to compare *Only Yesterday* with Brenner's "Mi-kan u-mi-kan" was David Maletz ("Bein 'Mi-kan u-mi-kan' le-vein *Temol shilsom*," *Molad* 4, no. 23 (1972): 524–531). In his examination he illuminates especially the differences in the descriptions of Jerusalem. In both texts, the protagonists go from Jaffa to Jerusalem, but while Brenner's protagonist sees only the negative aspects and the ugly sides of the city, Agnon's protagonist also sees the city's beautiful sublimity.

36. Schwartz, "Mah she-ro'im mi-kan lo ro'im mi-sham," 137. The term "period novel" combines, according to Schwartz, a "novel of a period" reflecting the era through its own eyes and with its characteristic forms of expression, and a "novel on a period," which examines the period from a distance and with from a critical point of view, even in parody (ibid., 122).



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after his death, bringing an end to a long drought, can be read as strengthening this tie; nevertheless, Isaac is presented as an individual who does not belong to the national project. At the end of the novel the narration states: "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*."[37] The well-known connection between the two variables—the Jewish nation and Isaac the individual—is here in doubt, according to Schwartz.[38] That is to say that there is a critical tone regarding the automatic perception of this relationship between nation and individual that Brenner saliently puts together in his stories. Assuming that *Only Yesterday* is to some extent in dialogue with Brenner, even if this may not be the main aim of the novel, the question is whether Agnon sought to add to Brenner's perspective, or to challenge it, both thematically and poetically.[39]

Agnon's later perspective on the Second Aliyah and on Brenner's standpoint is based on two insights. One is his sense that Brenner's nationalistic reckoning was too harsh and was proven wrong in many ways. As it turned out, the New Jew was indeed fit to work the land. The many agricultural settlements established in the thirties and forties that flourished are but one example of this success. The second insight is related to the influence of the news of the Holocaust that started to become known to the Jews in Palestine. For many, it had become clear that withdrawing from Jewish tradition and legacy was destructive. This position contrasts with Brenner's view, and that of his protagonists, as expressed in *Bein mayim le-mayim*, (Between water and water, 1910), and *Mi-kan u-mi-kan* (From here and there, 1911). In these works his characters wish to erase from the prayer book the phrase about being a chosen people, and express a desire to shatter the Western Wall. Brenner's protagonist in *Mi-kan u-mi-kan* argues that Jewish life in the Land of Israel, and even the life of the New Jew, is in some respects the same as life in the Diaspora: the same ghetto with the same hallmarks. Agnon, it seems, has a different opinion considering this iconoclastic Brennerian point of view. In any case, Agnon did not share Brenner's view, and news of the Holocaust only strengthened his ties to Jewish tradition.

In addition, Agnon criticized Brenner's poetic manner. In an interview, Agnon said that Brenner had understandings and insights about the Second Aliyah, but that his artistic skills did not deliver. Furthermore, Agnon said that Brenner "didn't ascribe sufficient importance to Jewish history."[40] This statement may be proof of Agnon's intention to enter into a poetic dialogue with Brenner's Second Aliyah works.[41] The significance of this is that Agnon tells a story of the

37. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 642.

38. Schwartz, "Mah she-ro'im mi-kan," 137.

39. It is not for nothing that Agnon planted in the plot an author character named Brenner who is described as "a great writer, brother of the oppressed." Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 402.

40. An interview with Galia Yardeni, 1962. Yardeni, *Teit zayin siḥot 'im sofrim* (ʿEin Ḥarod: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me'uḥad, 1962).

41. In his famous 1911 article, "Ha-janer ha-'ereẓ yisra'eli ve-'avizarayhu" (*Kol kitvei Brenner*, [Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1960], 2: 270–268), Brenner argues that descriptions of the new life and settlement in Palestine cannot be linear and coherent, but fragmentary like life itself. He also mentions Agnon as a



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Second Aliyah in a linear novel with greater breadth. By putting Jerusalem and religious life at the center of the book (transforming the focus from a horizontal plane to the vertical, centering on heavenly and earthly Jerusalem, as discussed earlier), he concerns himself with the nature of Jewish life on the land. Agnon, argues Yaakov Katz, reveals the confusion of Second Aliyah members regarding religious traditions.[42] When Kumer wanders through Jerusalem's streets, Agnon includes in the narrator's words an analysis of the religious crises of the young immigrants—from the day they came to the Land of Israel they were free from their fathers' eyes and from the burden of living a religious life. The reason for this is explained, emphasizes Katz, but in an ironic tone. They tell themselves that here in the land of the Jews, the danger from the gentiles that threatened them in the Diaspora no longer exists, namely, the concern over assimilation. On the land, there is no need to live according to Jewish law and to fulfill the mitzvot (commandments). The irony here plays both on the Jewish belief that being on the land protects Jews from the dangers of the Diaspora, and the naive thought that in the Promised Land there are no dangers at all.[43]

Agnon, argues Katz, believed that a complete renunciation of tradition and faith was destructive and wrong, even though during that particular period of time, complex matters were often seen in black and white terms. There was no support or encouragement for those who wished to keep tradition and combine it with agrarian pioneering. The alternative was to live in the Old Yishuv, but this, as happens to Kumer, meant choosing death. Katz believes that this is the main and severe lesson of *Only Yesterday*.[44] The structure of the vertical dimension turns the spotlight on a problem that bothered Agnon—the question of a young Jewish immigrant's constructing a balanced religious life for himself. The solution that Kumer chooses to resolve this emotional cleft is proven in the novel as impossible and wrong.

Kumer is not alienated from tradition; on the contrary, he misses it and thinks of it with yearning. When he happens to be at the Western Wall on a Friday night, he fulfills an urge to pray and to enjoy the sanctity of the Sabbath. However, his choice to live amidst the zealous and narrow-minded Jews of the Old Yishuv is not a suitable solution. According to Dan Laor, Agnon explicitly avoided declaring that the religious life was the answer to the mental and spiritual entanglement that Jewish society faced in Palestine, although he himself lived his

writer who does not use this kind of fragmentary poetics—a citation that might have inspired Agnon to respond and enter into a more direct literary dialogue with Brenner.

42. Yaakov Katz, "Agnon mul ha-mevukhah ha-datit," in *Shai ʿAgnon ba-bikoret ha-ʿIvrit,* ed. Avinoam Barshay, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Open University Press, 1992), 293–299.

43. Keeping the commandments in the Diaspora was meant to save the Jews from assimilation, but also to protect them physically. Jewish history shows otherwise. The covenant between the people of Israel and God—that if they keep the faith he will protect them from foes—was not exactly borne out in centuries of expulsions, pogroms, and other atrocities. When the pioneers, like Kumer, came to the Land of Israel they were not aware of the conflict with the Arabs until they were here. The naive thought that in the Promised Land there would no danger for Jews was very quickly proven false.

44. Katz, "Agnon mul ha-mevukhah ha-datit," 296, 299.



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life as a religious man.[45] The end of the novel, argues Laor, does not reflect Agnon's personal, biographical belief, but rather reveals a tragic aspect of the Zionist redemptive process. *Only Yesterday* therefore represents the historical tragedy of the period as perceived by Agnon.

From the moment Kumer meets Balak, an unwitting representative of Orthodox Jewry, symbolizing its dark and superstitious world, he is doomed. The novel's conflict focuses on the vertical dimension of geographical and psychological space, and from the moment of their meeting, it is clear that the Old Yishuv is not a solution for the young pioneer who seeks to live within the Jewish tradition while belonging to the Zionist camp. The traditional piety of the old Jerusalem "ghetto" does not allow for a balanced, productive, and modern religious life. Kumer's death reflects Me'ah She'arim's extreme and destructive environment.

The romantic narrative at the core of Hoffman's story "The Mines of Falun," also emerges in *Only Yesterday*. Kumer's plight, it turns out, is universal in its essence, but Agnon dressed it in a Jewish cloak. In romantic myths such as Orpheus and Eurydice, Demeter and Persephone, space is oriented vertically, and the journey from the upper world to the underworld, or netherworld, becomes a quest, often to find a loved one. Hoffman deviated from this romantic pattern in significant ways. Even though there are defined spaces literally above and below ground in his tale, there is no getting closer to a lost loved one, no sense of fulfilling a quest, and the protagonist dies instead of experiencing initiation.

Agnon's spaces of the vertical axis are not physical, but solely metaphorical—two spaces of spiritual concepts of Jewish religious life. His protagonist's quest is to find a new life and new self in the Land of Israel. He begins his journey in a typical Jewish location, the shtetl, continues to Palestine by train and ship, and upon his arrival, settles in a *moshavah* and then in the city of Jaffa—both secular Zionist environments. So far, Kumer's journey in the upper world and along the horizontal axis is representative of the journey of many young Jewish men like him. But his trajectory does not continue only in the obvious horizontal dimension, rather it is transferred to the vertical dimension. This changes the nature of the quest. Kumer gives up Zionist ideals and tries to find a way to live in the Land of Israel as a religious Jew. Therefore he settles in an ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist neighborhood where people live as they have for centuries. He gives up the goal of a new life for a New Jew, the journey that he set out on in the first place.

For Kumer, the "mines," or the netherworld, are the old, dark, and ancient ways of Jewish living, an extreme worldview and lifestyle that did not even exist to this degree in eastern Europe. Agnon, like Hoffman, deviates from the romantic descent scheme, while he recruits it to debate the efficacy and relevance of a Jewish-oriented lifestyle during that era. One can argue that during the Second Aliyah there was not really a major conflict between the heavenly Jerusalem and earthly Jerusalem, since, as mentioned earlier, there did not seem to be an option of leading a balanced and healthy religious life. One could be a Zionist and secular, or

45. Dan Laor, *Ḥayei 'Agnon: Biografyah* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schoken, 1998), 372.



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an Orthodox Jew. If the rootless character remained alive in many stories and novels in order to highlight the ongoing conflict between these two poles, in Agnon's novel the conflict is put to rest. Agnon did not see the Old Yishuv and its anti-Zionist zealots as a viable option, and left the conflict, as embodied by the rootless character, unresolved.

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