

INTRODUCTION

Between Figure and Creature

RECENT YEARS HAVE SEEN a remarkable proliferation of critical literature dealing with animals as objects of philosophical and ethical inquiry. Under the heading of “Animal Studies,” this diverse critical literature challenged some of the unquestioned premises of the humanistic legacy that has dominated Western thought, such as the human–animal boundary, anthropocentrism, cruelty to animals, the limits of the human, and animal feelings and consciousness. Works in Animal Studies have built on a critical approach to Martin Heidegger’s discussion of animals in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, and were influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of “becoming-animal” as well as by the late writings of Jacques Derrida in which his engagement with animality has served to question the metaphysical concept of the subject. In this context, the preoccupation with animals and animality has functioned as a critique of dominant philosophical notions and prevalent social practices that implicitly assume the centrality of humans in the world and ascribe to human beings an inherent primacy over other species. This book takes up such a preoccupation with animality not in order to offer yet another critical account of humanism and anthropocentrism, but in order to revise the terms in which the distinction between human and animal has been formulated in modern Western thought. Instead of staging a polemical philosophical dichotomy between discriminatory anthropocentric practices and a more attentive posthumanist approach, I will show how animality itself emerges as a persistent and unresolvable problem in modernity, and how this problem came to be closely associated with prevailing notions regarding Jewish identity.

As a point of departure for my inquiry I would like to take up the fundamental distinction between the presentation of Jews in literary, philosophical, and theological texts—where they play a determined role in the construction of specific arguments and positions, or assume a certain

symbolic meaning—as opposed to the lived experience to which these representations refer, and which is by no means identical with them. This essential gap between *figure* and *lived experience* is proposed by Andrew Benjamin, for whom the figure is “the constitution of an identity in which the construction has a specific function that is predominantly external to the concerns of the identity itself.”¹ In the case of Jewish identity, the construction of the figure of the Jew by non-Jews, which is external to Judaism, continued at the same time to influence the ways in which Jewish identity came to be internally shaped, envisioned, and affirmed, especially in modernity.

The texts to be examined in this book present various attempts by Jewish writers to negotiate the distance between figure and experience in relation to Jewish identity by means of an intermediary—a provisional figural construction that I call the *infrahuman*—in which this distance comes to the fore yet remains suspended and unresolved. As a literary or poetic construction, the *infrahuman* is above all distinguished by its universality, that is, by its capacity to integrate into contexts that are both internal and external to Judaism. And to the extent that it is universal, the *infrahuman* is inevitably associated with figural constructions of animality. To be sure, at stake here is not animality conceived as an ontological or conceptual category, but rather as a theological figure of exclusion from a state of humanity and Christianity alike.

Such a figural conflation of Judaism and animality is by no means new; its sources can be traced to the inception of Christianity, as far back as to Paul’s designation of the Jews in I Corinthians 10:18 as “Israel after the flesh,” and to the entire Pauline trope of the distinction between letter and spirit. Paul described the Jews’ historical existence as carnal, physical, material, and literal. The Jews can only read according to the flesh; they do not see beyond the literal meaning of the word to the spirit behind the language.² Therefore, their place as the “children of the promise” has been taken by the new true and spiritual Israel, as Paul states in Romans 4:13: “For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.” In Philippians 3:2–3, Paul explicitly associates the Jewish adherence to the letter of the law with dogs in his exhortation against the rite of circumcision: “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in

Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” Drawing on this Pauline legacy, the late fourth-century church father John Chrysostom asserted—in his interpretation of the words of Christ in Matthew 15:26: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs”—that it is now the “carnal Jews” who are “the dogs”, and the Gentiles have become the “children.”³ Kenneth Stow has shown how this identification of Jews with dogs continued to reverberate in the writings and sermons of Christian theologians and church leaders throughout the Middle Ages as well as in modern times.⁴

In the traditional Christian worldview Jews were thus seen as closer to animals than to humans because they lacked the spirituality and reason shared by all Christians. Consequently, medieval law codes classified sexual intercourse with Jews as bestiality, and Jews were commonly depicted as occupying a middle ground between humans and animals.⁵ In this context the figure of the dog assumed a special importance, as Leonid Livak observed, since both Jews and dogs played a “dual narrative function”⁶ within the traditional Christian worldview, acting both as opponents of the faith and as its helpers. As witnesses to the true Christian faith, their hostile energy was ultimately harnessed for the glorification of the church. In early modern thought this fundamentally theological construction of animality as an exclusion from Christian morality, rationality, and order of redemption came to be “secularized” in Cartesian philosophy in which humanity was posited as a distinct spiritual substance, different from and superior to the rest of the natural world. The Cartesian view, which came to inform subsequent Enlightenment thought, presents an essentialist figural construction of animality as *subhuman*: that is, as an inherent and irreversible fact of ontology or biology that renders all nonhuman species categorically inferior to humanity.

Nevertheless, the Cartesian view was not the only anthropocentric construction of animality to emerge in early modern thought. One of the characteristic formulations of an alternative figural model of animality can be found in Thomas Hobbes’s dedication to *De Cive* (1642):

There are two maxims which are surely both true: Man is a God to man, and Man is a wolf to Man. The former is true of the relations of citizens with each other, the latter of relations between commonwealths. In justice and charity, the virtues of peace, citizens show

some likeness to God. But between commonwealths, the wickedness of bad men compels the good too to have recourse, for their own protection, to the virtues of war, which are violence and fraud, i.e. to the predatory nature of beasts.⁷

For Hobbes, the natural condition of *homo homini lupus* that exists between commonwealths is also the hypothetical ground from which one begins to theorize the establishment of the Social Contract, the civil state in which people treat each other with “justice and charity.” This condition of citizenship is contrasted with the lawless struggle for survival implied by life in a “state of nature.” To live in a “state of nature” means to be bound by no Social Contract, to belong in no civic order, and to possess no legal rights. In this state no sovereign power guarantees human life and property, and therefore humans have recourse only to their own faculties for self-preservation. Consequently, in a state of nature, humans are reduced to the condition of beasts, a condition characterized by the single-minded and shameless pursuit of gratification of the most basic biological needs. Significantly, Hobbes does not describe the difference between the human and the animal in biological or ontological terms, but rather in terms of an inclusion in, or an exclusion from, a condition of citizenship. Thus, for Hobbes, the prerogative of humans over animals consists in the fact that humans are able to enjoy the privileges of peace, justice, and charity by virtue of a membership in a commonwealth. Beasts and savages, by contrast, are consigned to a life of peacelessness, implying that anyone can harm or kill them with impunity.

In this sense, the “state of nature” of animal life is not simply conceived by Hobbes as a biological occurrence with no relation to the law and to human community. Rather, animal life appears as “bare life,” a life abandoned by the law, “exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.”⁸ According to Giorgio Agamben, this relation of abandonment by the law is the original relation by which the law applies itself to life. The figure that marks this transition between law and life, a condition of citizenship and a “state of nature,” is the wolf-man, *homo homini lupus*, the werewolf, whose life “is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and to the city. It

is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion.”⁹

Although Hobbes’s thought remains entirely anthropocentric in privileging “peaceful” human existence over “peaceless” natural existence, he locates the figure of the animal on a scale in which it forms a continuity with human existence. The Hobbesian construction of animality would therefore allow the existence of such transitional figures as the wolf-man, a hybrid that occupies an indeterminate position between human and animal as well as between law and nature, and which would not be conceivable in a system of thought that posits a rigid boundary between the two. In Hobbesian thought, the wolf-man thus forms a locus of the *infrahuman*: a figural construction of animality conceived as inferior to humanity, where the human–animal distinction is not formulated in essentialist biological, ontological, or racial terms, but rather in discursive terms—that is, in terms that remain culturally, politically, and philosophically negotiable.

The distinction between the figures of *subhuman* and *infrahuman* operates fully within the bounds of anthropocentric thought, and does not disrupt or challenge the traditional categories by which the difference between the human and the nonhuman has been conceived in Western thought. In this sense, my use of the term “infrahuman” differs from the way in which it was originally employed by Jacques Derrida and subsequently by Beatrice Hanssen in her book on Walter Benjamin.¹⁰ For Derrida, the term “infrahuman” carried certain taxonomical implications when he employed it in order to expand the frame of reference of the “subhuman” from animals and specific racial groups to include inanimate objects (such as stones). On the other hand, he also used the term in order to call into question the conceptual distinction between human and animal. Ultimately, both Derrida and Hanssen employ the term “infrahuman” polemically, to undermine unquestioned Western philosophical and conceptual premises regarding animality. In this book the term “infrahuman” does not exclude such a particular philosophical agenda, but it locates it within the purview of a certain literary trope—a figure—that has gone largely unarticulated and unnoticed in Western literature and thought.

As we will see, modern Jewish writers had recourse to the *infrahuman* in their own constructions of Jewish identity. In doing so they were not

simply practicing Jewish “self-hatred,” even though at times their depictions of Jews as debased animals rivaled anti-Semitic stereotypes. Instead, they employed the images of Jewish animals, with all their inherent ambiguity, as allegorical figures that could equally inhabit a Jewish as well as a non-Jewish literary setting. By appropriating these figures of exclusion from non-Jewish sources and by further elaborating and developing them, modern Jewish writers embarked on an intimate dialogue with non-Jewish literary traditions, a dialogue that eventually secured a place for certain works of Jewish literature in both the modern Western literary canon as well as in the modern Jewish canon. By depicting Jews as lowly animals, Jewish authors validated some of the negative stereotypes ascribed to Jews by gentiles. Yet by framing the human–animal question in philosophical or political terms rather than in racial–biological terms, they subjected these pejorative designations to literary elaboration and to philosophical negotiation.

THE FIGURE OF THE JEW as infrahuman made its debut on the stage of modern European literature some fifty years before Hobbes published *De Cive*, in William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1599). In this play, a character named Gratiano accuses the Jew Shylock of possessing a wolfish character in terms that resemble Hobbes’s subsequent characterization of animality in a “state of nature”:

O, be thou damn’d, inexecrable dog!
 And for thy life let justice be accused!
 Thou almost makest me waver in my faith
 To hold opinion with Pythagoras,
 That souls of animals infuse themselves
 Into the trunks of men: thy currish spirit
 Govern’d a wolf, who, hang’d for human slaughter,
 Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
 And, whilst thou lay’st in thy unhallow’d dam,
 Infused itself in thee; for thy desires
 Are wolfish, bloody, starved and ravenous.¹¹

The association of the Jew with an image of the wolf hanged for “human slaughter” reflects the Jew’s liminal social status, recalling the old

myth of the werewolf that was prevalent in many Germanic and Anglo-Saxon medieval sources, in which an outlaw banned from human society was depicted as a man with a wolf's head.¹² Traces of this menacing figure of the werewolf as the banned outlaw have found their way into *The Merchant of Venice*, and like those "peaceless" men who were excluded from human community, Shylock comes to exemplify a threshold condition between humanity and animality. As the examples from Shakespeare and Hobbes indicate, the myth of the werewolf has not disappeared from the modern Western imagination.¹³ In *The Merchant of Venice*, this myth is explicitly invoked in relation to the figure of the modern Jew, who, like the banned outlaw, is an outsider to human society and lacks the spiritual and moral character shared by all Christians. Indeed, Shylock's transgressive behavior lies in his quintessentially modern attitude. For he has dared to step out of his cultural and social enclave and live among the Gentiles, conducting business with them without renouncing his religious faith and ethnic identity. His existence in Christian society therefore defies the very premises of peace, justice, and charity on which this civic order is predicated. In order to reduce the threat posed by this outsider, his exclusion from civic life must be made palpably clear. He is therefore repeatedly marked as a wolf-man, serving as a constant reminder that the foundation of civic order, in the words of Agamben, "is not an event achieved once and for all but is continually operative in the civil state in the form of the sovereign decision."¹⁴ In the presence of the sovereign, the Duke of Venice, Shylock is ultimately reduced to a condition of bare life through the arguments of Gratiano and Portia, as opposed to the civic life incarnated by his legal adversary Antonio.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Shylock's exclusion from civic life does not take place outside of human society or exemplify a presocial state, but instead demonstrates the active operation of sovereign power by means of an exclusive inclusion of the Jew in a "state of nature" within the bounds of the civic order.

Once contained by sovereign power and reduced to bare life, the threat posed by the Jew is effectively neutralized and he no longer appears as a wolf but rather as a lowly canine, an "inexcrable dog" whose existence is external to the civic order and yet reliant upon it. In this capacity, the Jew bears an affinity with other abject animals such as a street dog, a rat, or even a cockroach. Unlike wild beasts, these creatures dwell in human society and feed

off waste products. However, since they are not domesticated and have no formal social or civic affiliation, they possess no legal rights. Consequently, they are relegated to the position of barely tolerated pests or vermin that can be harmed or killed with impunity.

In contrast to traditional Christian accounts that stress the similarity between Jews and dogs, the originality of Shakespeare's narrative lies in that it is not exclusively grounded in metaphorical or theological terms, as due punishment for adherence to the letter as opposed to the spirit. Instead, Shylock's doggishness is taken quite literally. He is not a man whose despicable behavior renders him comparable to a dog. Instead, Shylock is perceived as a creature whose desires are "wolvish, bloody, starved and ravenous." By invoking the image of the Jewish dog as a figure of exclusion from civic life, Shakespeare was not "secularizing" the theological image. Rather, that image was now reinscribed, along with its subtle theological connotations, in the sphere of modern citizenship. Thus, what originally was a figure of theological exclusion now became synonymous, in the modern context, with a figure of social and political exclusion. Moreover, such an exclusion was no longer conceived in terms of a banishment from a community, but in terms of an essential containment—an exclusive inclusion of the Jew in a "state of nature" within the bounds of civic society.

IN 1838 THE GERMAN-JEWISH POET Heinrich Heine saw Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in England and later wrote about it with an ambivalent mixture of indignation and admiration. On the one hand, he protested the attempt to present the Jew as an "unmitigated werewolf for the amusement of the crowd;"¹⁶ yet for him the figure of Shylock ultimately provided a justification for the actions of a Jew in retaliation to the hatred on the part of Christian society, despite the author's explicit intentions. Years later, in his poem "Prinzessin Sabbat" (1851), Heine invoked the figure of the Jewish dog in order to reclaim it as an emblematic tragic hero. In this poem a cursed prince named Israel is portrayed as "a dog with doggish thoughts" who piddles through "life's excrement and rubbish."¹⁷ It is primarily through the impact of this poem that the infrahuman enters Jewish literature in the middle of the nineteenth century. Heine's poem was not only familiar to early twentieth-century German-Jewish writers such as Else Lasker-Schüler and Franz Kafka, but also to Russian maskilic writers in the 1860s and the

1870s such as Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, the “grandfather” of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. In his writings, Abramovitsh adapted the figure of the Jewish dog to his own purposes, using it to present a satiric portrayal of the shtetl Jew and to point to the urgent need for reform in both Jewish and non-Jewish Russian societies. Notably, in 1865 Abramovitsh wrote a short story about Shmulik the Ragman who lived as a “dog” during the week, and on the Sabbath was transformed into a “prince.”¹⁸ By the end of the nineteenth century the Hebrew poet Hayim Nachman Bialik likewise invoked the figure of the Jewish dog in his poem “Igeret Ktana” (A Short Letter, 1893), in which the poetic addresser, an exilic Jew writing a letter to his brother in Zion, pejoratively portrays himself as “a dog in a lost land; / driven away with sticks, feeding on crumbs, / forsaken and forgotten from heart and God.”¹⁹ The figure of the Jewish dog continued to make its appearance in Zionist literature in the years leading to the foundation of the State of Israel and thereafter, most notably in Bialik’s famous pogrom poem “Be-‘ir ha-haregah” (“In the City of Killings”), in Uri Zvi Greenberg’s *Kelev Baiyt* (*House Dog*), and in S. Y. Agnon’s 1945 novel *Temol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*), where it served to emphasize the discrepancy between the degenerate diasporic Jew and the proud “new Jew” envisioned by Zionism. In Yiddish literature, this figure likewise appears in the works of Sholem Aleichem and Israel Joshua Singer, and in post-World War II Jewish literature the dog continues to haunt the works of Paul Celan and Yoram Kanyuk, to name but a few examples.

The question remains in what ways these figures of dogs in Jewish literature—in their capacity as literary constructions exemplifying the unresolved gap between figure and experience—also convey the lived experience of Jews in modernity? As the figure of the dog came to be increasingly identified with the fundamentally modern Jewish condition of an exclusive inclusion in the civic order, its experiential content has been addressed in Jewish literature by means of the category of the *creaturely*. The creaturely is a corollary of the anthropocentric outlook that ascribes to human beings an inherent dominion over earthly creation. The earliest articulation of the intrinsic link between sovereignty and creatureliness is found in Genesis 1:26, where man is given divine sanction to subjugate all creatures that populate the earth. Significantly, the nature of human dominion over creation is indicated by the Hebrew word “*va-yirdu*,” which stems from the root *rada*:

to rule without justice (the Hebrew word for tyrant, *rodan*, stems from the same root). From its biblical beginnings, then, the notion of the creaturely implies a subjugation to an unbounded exercise of sovereign power. This theological notion, which has traditionally served as a locus for contemplating the equivalence of human and nonhuman existence in relation to the divine, transforms in modernity into a criterion by which to assess the human capacity to succumb to political power. As Eric Santner writes:

Creaturely life—the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal . . . is a product not simply of man’s thrownness into the (enigmatic) “openness of Being” but of his exposure to a traumatic dimension of political power and social bonds whose structures have undergone radical transformations in modernity. The “essential disruption” that renders man “creaturely” . . . has, that is, a distinctly political—or better, biopolitical—aspect; it names the threshold where life becomes a matter of politics and politics comes to inform the very matter and materiality of life.²⁰

There is perhaps no better example in modern literature of the encounter between Jewish life and the dictates of political sovereignty than in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, where the impact of the exposure to the traumatic dimension of political power is subtly registered by Shylock toward the end of the play. Although he formally declares his satisfaction with the outcome of the trial, there is no joy or happiness in Shylock’s “contentment” over the loss of his daughter, half of everything he owned, and the requirement to convert to Christianity. Yet before examining Shylock’s response in detail, we must first recall the nature of his peculiar legal position vis-à-vis his legal adversary, Antonio. In the play, Venetian civic law is presented as a distinctly modern institution, a corollary of a nascent form of capitalism that would protect the rights of both parties in a commercial transaction conducted between a Venetian citizen such as Antonio, and a Venetian “alien” such as Shylock. Initially, Shylock takes Antonio to court for breach of contract. However, in the ensuing trial, Portia (who functions as Antonio’s advocate) makes a deliberate move from civil to criminal law, claiming that Shylock has plotted against Antonio’s life. After successfully arguing her case, the right of judgment and mercy that under Venetian law

lay in the hands of the litigant, is wrenched from Shylock and delivered to the Duke of Venice, whose political sovereignty is suddenly reaffirmed.

As Julia Lupton has argued, the restoration of sovereign power at this peculiar intersection of the boundaries between civil and criminal law and between citizen and alien, is the result of a “miniature state of emergency, a situation in which someone—in this case, the Duke—must step above the merely civil law and make a decision concerning life and death, reinstating a moment of political theology within the legal regime of Venetian constitutionalism.”²¹ As Lupton makes clear, the suspension of civic law and a reversion to a state of emergency is not so much a function of the murder charge, but rather a result of the threat posed by the Jewish outsider, a wolf-man whose very existence threatens the viability of the notions of peace, justice, and charity on which the Venetian civic order is predicated.²² The suspension of civic law and the implementation of a state of emergency therefore arise out of the intrinsic necessity to protect the security of the state, to reestablish the political stability to which civic law could then apply.

This paradoxical relation between civic law and a state of emergency (also known as a *state of exception*) was famously established by Carl Schmitt in his definition of the sovereign as “he who decides on the [state of] exception.”²³ According to the “decisionist” logic of sovereignty articulated by Schmitt, in a state of exception the distinction between the different powers of the State (legislative, executive, and judicial) is suspended, not in order to return to the so-called “full powers” (*plenitudo potestatis*) of sovereignty,²⁴ but rather to have recourse to an empty zone of the law. As Schmitt writes:

It is precisely the exception that makes relevant the subject of sovereignty, that is, the whole question of sovereignty. The precise details of an emergency cannot be anticipated, nor can one spell out what may take place in such a case, especially when it is truly a matter of an extreme emergency and of how it is to be eliminated. The precondition as well as the content of jurisdictional competence in such a case must necessarily be unlimited.²⁵

At this intersection of law and life in the state of exception it is not the absolute authority of the sovereign that is exercised, but rather a fundamental

absence of the law that Agamben has aptly termed “kenomatic state.”²⁶ In other words, the state of exception does not imply a subjection to the authority of the law, but rather a condition of utter abandonment by the law. As a result of Portia’s intervention, the life of Shylock remains bound to Venetian law precisely in this relation of abandonment, and thus he stands before the law as bare life or as a mere *creature*. In his creaturely estate, Shylock is divested of the various legal, social, and civil ties that bound him as an alien to Venetian civic life. Then, in a sovereign act of Christian “mercy,” the Duke offers to perpetuate Shylock’s state of creaturely abandonment by means of a legal formula:

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirits,
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it:
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio’s;
The other half comes to the general state,
Which humbleness may drive unto a fine. (4.1.366–70)

Shylock, however, rejects the Duke’s offer. Refusing to be reduced to bare life, he insists instead on a qualified form of life—a *bios* as opposed to the *zoë* of animal existence²⁷—by arguing that without livelihood life is not worth living:

Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that:
You take my house when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house; you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live. (4.1.372–75)

Only after Antonio offers to rescind the money now owed him by Shylock—on condition that he convert to Christianity and that his remaining wealth will pass to his daughter and son-in-law after his death—does Shylock finally declare he is “content” with the arrangement. Indeed, Antonio’s offer aims to restore Shylock to the circle of Venetian civic life and thereby mitigate the Duke’s decree. But precisely at this point, even a sharp critic such as Lupton, who examines Shakespeare’s work from the angle of political theology, has failed to notice that the restoration of Shylock’s legal status rests on a double act of Christian mercy: the first, which is sovereign, consigns him to a creaturely estate and acknowledges only the simple fact of his bare life; the second, which is civil, restores Shylock’s civic affiliations

within the framework of the Venetian polity. The crucial point is that behind the façade of restoration of ties to the civic community, Shylock has in fact forfeited his previous legal standing as an alien (whose rights are constitutionally guaranteed by Venetian law), and he now stands before the law as a creature, reduced to bare life. It is this traumatic reduction to creaturely life that explains Shylock's ambivalent reply to Portia's question: "art thou contented Jew?"

SHYLOCK: I am content.

PORTIA: Clerk, draw a deed of gift.

SHYLOCK: I pray you, give me leave to go from hence;
I am not well: send the deed after me,
And I will sign it. (4.1.390–95)

Shylock's reply, expressing an ambivalent mixture of content and discontent, exemplifies above all an irreconcilable gap between figure and lived experience as the outcome of exposure to sovereign power in a state of exception. Shylock's formal declaration of contentment is part of a figural construction of Jewish identity by non-Jews in which "the construction has a specific function that is predominantly external to the concerns of the identity itself."²⁸ Specifically, it marks the moment in which the hostile wolf-man, whose desires are "bloody, starved and ravenous," is domesticized, turned into a submissive dog by virtue of sovereign decision. On the other hand, the lived experience of the Jew remains incompatible with such figural "contentment." This is not because, as Lupton argues, Shylock's characteristically Jewish "life form is altered forever,"²⁹ but rather because he is now condemned to face sovereign power not as a resident alien but as bare life. It is for this reason that Shylock feels "not well" in the court and in the presence of the Duke and must depart.

When considered in these terms, the court scene in *The Merchant of Venice* is remarkable because it presents us with a figural construction of Jewish identity in which the lived experience of the Jew is not suppressed. Simply put, for Shylock there is no final closure regarding the question of both civic and Jewish identity, since his formal act of religious and civic conversion is brought about by a traumatic exposure to the law as bare life. Instead of emphasizing the figural construction of Jewish identity as a form of animality, Shakespeare lays bare the fundamental unresolvedness of figure

and lived experience in the case of Shylock, depicting him both as a Jewish dog and as a suffering creature. This unresolvable tension between the abject figure of an animal and the bare life that it encapsulates is the hallmark of the infrahuman, in Shakespeare as well as in subsequent Jewish literature.

THE FOREGOING ANALYSIS of the infrahuman as the site in which the gap between figure and lived experience remains suspended and unresolved stands in sharp contrast to the notion of “creaturely poetics” in the field of Animal Studies. “Creaturely poetics,” as formulated by Anat Pick, is the latest attempt at harmonizing and overcoming the inherent tension between the opposite poles of the (nonhuman) figure and the creature by conflating the two into a single identity—conceived as both beautiful and vulnerable—whose essential unity is guaranteed by its underlying universal, quasi-theological character.³⁰ It is indeed a theological framework that underlies the nature of the symbol as a unity of spirit and matter, and for Pick symbolic form takes the shape of a postsecular unity of the beautiful with the vulnerable or the creaturely.³¹ In contrast to the symbolic form that underlies Pick’s “creaturely poetics,” the proper form for the articulation of the infrahuman is *allegory*.³² For in allegory, as Walter Benjamin maintained, figural meaning remains separated from creaturely existence by an insurmountable abyss:

The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance. But if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical. Significance and death both come to fruition in historical development, just as they are closely linked as seeds in the creature’s graceless state of sin.³³

According to Benjamin, allegory exposes the essential gap between “significance” [Bedeutung] and “physical nature” [Physis], whose expressions are, respectively, “historical development” and “the creature’s graceless state of sin.” By establishing a conventional and arbitrary association between abstract meaning and the natural object that designates it, allegory lays bare the artificiality of the symbolic unity of spirit and matter, significance

and physical nature, historical development and creaturely life, and thereby resists the sublation of lived experience to a totalizing figural scheme. Whereas the symbol imposes unity, immediacy, and harmony on the opposite poles of historical development and creaturely life—encapsulating what Benjamin calls the “idea of fulfilled historical time”³⁴—in allegory these two poles remain separated by the “jagged line of demarcation” drawn by death, foreclosing the possibility of a momentary transcendence of time in the symbol that Max Pensky has adequately termed “the ironic expression of timelessness within the temporal.”³⁵

The form of temporality that thus emerges in allegory is not that of a teleological historical process, but is instead a manifestation of *natural history*. To be sure, natural history in Benjamin’s idiosyncratic use of the term does not only designate an empty temporal continuum, but a reduction of the historical event to “spatial inauthenticity,” where it comes to be encoded in a form that appears ill suited for the reception of its primary signification.³⁶ The allegorical displacement of historical events onto aesthetic phenomena does not imply a flight from historical time or obliviousness to history. On the contrary, the spatialization of the historical marks a specific kind of historical awareness that invests itself in figures whose meaning remains transitory and dependent upon the specific social and cultural context from within which they were articulated.

As an allegorical figure, the infrahuman is predicated on this displacement of a set of sociohistorical conditions onto aesthetic-natural phenomena. Exemplifying the spatialization of the historical, the animality of the Jew is emblematic of the cultural and historical conditions that have shaped the lives of Jews in exile and that have inscribed themselves on the very physicality of the Jew. Yet within the realm of allegory, this figural construction of Jewish identity as animality is disrupted by the emergence of that which refuses to assimilate into significance and historical development: the creaturely, whose emblematic expression is found in Shylock’s “I am not well.” Here the articulation of Jewish experience does not only bear witness to the unbridgeable gap from figural expression, but also threatens to unravel the figural construction of Jewish identity as animality. Jewish life thus emerges as a deficient mode of existence in which animality serves as a mark of insufficient humanity, yet at the same time this animality

itself is punctuated with the dimension of the creaturely, the residue that does not assimilate into a figural construction.³⁷ This deficient mode of existence that is neither human nor animal recurs in subsequent depictions of the infrahuman in modern Jewish literature: Heine's Jew, "a dog with doggish thoughts," transforms into a prince on the Sabbath; Abramovitsh's mare likewise appears as a dumb animal "chewing hay, calm, nonchalant, without a care in the world,"³⁸ but its suffering is the suffering of Jews in the Diaspora; in Bialik's poem, the spiders on the wall provide testimony on what took place in the pogrom; and in Kafka's "Animal in the Synagogue," a marten-like creature attends the religious services in the synagogue like a practicing Jew, but it does so only because it is always startled anew by the intrusion of people into its natural habitat.

In light of such examples it is important to note that the recalcitrant form of experience that is synonymous with creaturely life is not an expression of "Jewish Thought" (in the sense of traditional forms of Jewish learning), nor should it be confused with any doctrine internal to Judaism. Instead, the articulation of the creaturely designates a notion of raw experience whose origins are found in Pauline theology. In Romans 8:19–23, Paul explicitly identifies the creaturely with a vision of earthly nature devoid of divine redemption:

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, sigh inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

As the dimension common to both human and nonhuman existence, the creaturely implies a subjection to futility and decay, that is, to a natural-historical trajectory in the Benjaminian sense.³⁹ However, as Eric Santner perceptively observed, in Pauline writings the "bondage to decay" also implies a certain relation to Jewish law: "this is a relation in which law

not only regulates and pacifies but also agitates and excites (to transgressive enjoyment).⁴⁰ The transgressive enjoyment that operates in the empty time of natural-historical progression is triggered by the authoritative voice of Jewish law that commands and thereby arouses sinful passions:

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. (Romans 7:7–10)

When viewed in light of these essential Pauline terms, the Benjaminian dichotomy between "historical development" and the "creature's graceless state of sin" assumes its full conceptual and theological dimensions. For it is only with the advent of the Jewish law that death emerges as a "jagged line of demarcation" between "significance" and "physical nature," and not, as Benjamin believed, with a postlapsarian state.⁴¹ From a traditional Christian perspective, natural history would then be the form of temporality synonymous with the Jewish experience of time, and creatureliness would appear as the outcome of "bondage" to Jewish law. Paradoxically, precisely these denigrated aspects of Jewish life re-emerge in Shakespeare's account of Shylock and in modern Jewish literature as disruptive elements in the figural construction of Jewish identity as animality. They point not to the suppressed humanity of the Jew, but to his exposure to a law in a state of exception. In this exposure of the Jew as a creature in a "graceless state of sin," the universal dimensions of Jewish suffering are ultimately revealed. For in the final account, Jewish life comes into its own not in the irreconcilable hostility to Christian society and morality, but in creaturely groaning—Shylock's "I am not well"—that encapsulates the wish to be liberated from the bondage to natural history. This primordial messianic impulse occupies a peculiar position within the Christian worldview, since it does not properly belong in the Christian faith, and yet it is universally shared by all of creation. Benjamin, in his essay on Kafka, called it "the

natural prayer of the soul.⁴² Moreover, within this constellation, the Jew occupies a special position with respect to the rest of creation: since he partakes in creaturely life and yet is able to express himself in language, he becomes—to borrow yet another phrase from Benjamin that he employed in a different context—the “advocate for all creatures, and at the same time their highest embodiment.”⁴³ As the advocate of the creaturely, the complaint uttered by Shylock and formulated in human words is in reality an articulation of the silent language of nature, providing a glimpse into the profane yearning for redemption shared by all of creation.

The infrahuman thus emerges as the site in which the unresolved theological position of Jewish existence from a Christian perspective is allegorized as a deficient form of animality—which is at the same time construed as the highest embodiment of the creaturely. As previously mentioned, the infrahuman does not challenge prevalent anthropocentric notions, nor does it simply constitute an anti-Semitic stereotype. Although at no point is the humanity of the Jew asserted, his animality is posited as a political-theological difference rather than a racial or biological difference. Indeed, it is precisely by virtue of a latent theological dimension that the Jew’s political plight assumes its universal appeal as the sigh of the oppressed creature. In this sense, the analysis of the infrahuman in modern Jewish literature provides an alternative account to the conventional debate on the “Jewish Question”—a public debate that preoccupied prominent European intellectuals, philosophers, and jurists during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and dealt with the prospect of the moral and intellectual rehabilitation of the Jews and their integration into non-Jewish society. By contrast, the infrahuman exposes a relation between Judaism and European culture and society that is marked by attentiveness to the dehumanized aspects of Jewish existence. With the infrahuman, the artificiality of the figural construction of Jewish identity is laid bare not in the name of an abstract, universal ideal of humanity—that is, not by something foreign to Christianity itself—but in the name of creaturely life, a notion that emerges from the very foundations of European culture and society.

At this point it may be reasonably argued, following Andrew Benjamin, that the creaturely does not refer to authentic Jewish experience but simply to another figure in which “the constitution of an identity . . . has a specific function that is predominantly external to the concerns of the identity itself.”

While this argument may be true as far as the specifically Jewish content of experience is concerned, it does not apply to the general validity of experience as such. Here we must bear in mind that in the *Merchant of Venice* the reduction of Shylock to a creaturely estate is not an outcome of a theological argument between Christians and Jews, but of an exposure to sovereign power in a state of exception. Although the general validity of the experience of creaturely abandonment and bare life in a state of exception is by no means restricted to Jews, the Jew nevertheless emerges as an emblematic figure on which the effects of sovereign power in a state of exception are subtly registered. This is due not only to the Jew's marginal social status within European society, but also to the theological image of Jews within Christianity as quintessentially creaturely, which would allow for a relatively easy transition from the sphere of theology to the sphere of modern citizenship. Thus, instead of depicting a struggle for emancipation, the literature of the infrahuman depicts the individual's futile attempts to extricate himself from the empty time of natural-historical progression; instead of the prospect of integration, acculturation, or assimilation, it offers an experience of abandonment and degradation. By exploring this hitherto overlooked vector of modern Jewish existence, the infrahuman allows us to reimagine the lived experience of Jews in the modern world before World War II.

THE FIRST CHAPTER, "Life in The Valley: The Jewish Dog in Heinrich Heine's 'Prinzessin Sabbat,'" deals with the late writings of Heinrich Heine in which a "Jewish" persona emerges in response to Heine's acute physical collapse. This late persona is distinguished both from Heine's previous "Greek" persona and from the "Nazarene" mentality with which he polemicalized. Emblematized in the figure of a dog in the poem "Prinzessin Sabbat," Heine's late adoption of a "Jewish" identity marks a perspective that is reconciled with the inevitable transience of happiness, yet remains opposed to the "Nazarene" denial of corporeality and earthly pleasures.

The second chapter, "A Radical Advocacy: Suffering Jews and Animals in S. Y. Abramovitch's *Di Kliatshe*," focuses on the novella *Di kliatshe* by S. Y. Abramovitch (also known as "Mendele the Book Peddler"), in which the dehumanized figure of a mare is invoked as an allegory for the political and social conditions of Jews in tsarist Russia. By reconstituting the social and historical context in which this work emerged, I show how it came to

promote a radical ethical position on the question of human and animal suffering, and engaged in a subtle literary dialogue with non-Jewish authors.

The third chapter, “Into the Bowels of the Earth: Prophecy and Animality in The Poetry of Hayim Nachman Bialik and Uri Zvi Greenberg,” addresses the tension between prophecy and nature in Bialik’s pogrom poem “In The City of Killings,” and in Greenberg’s *House Dog*. In both cases the Zionist poet-prophet delves into the profane realm of nature in order to extract from it a redemptive historical meaning for the Jewish collective. In the context of Bialik’s pogrom poem, this prophetic function affirms the irreducible humanity of the poet, whereas in Greenberg’s poems this prophetic function is the hallmark of the “house dog,” contrasted with the figure of the diasporic “street dog.”

The fourth chapter, “At Home in a Distorted Life: The Dog as a Constellation in The Work of Franz Kafka,” explores the role of the dog in Kafka’s writings and its relation to Jewish identity. In Kafka’s writings the figure of the dog is associated with a subjection to an obscure law, the product of an ambiguous desire. Kafka’s protagonists, who are burdened by the impenetrable mystery that surrounds their existence, ultimately embrace undisclosedness of meaning as a form of earthly redemption in which their humanity is reconciled with animal life.

In the final chapter, “After The Holocaust: Responses to The Infrahuman in The Writings of S. Y. Agnon and Paul Celan,” I chart the development of the infrahuman in Jewish literature after World War II in response to Kafka’s legacy, by focusing on S. Y. Agnon’s novel *Only Yesterday* and on Paul Celan’s “Meridian” speech. Both works explore a relation between artifice and the creature, and outline the terms in which the dichotomy between history and nature will be staged in Jewish literature after the Holocaust.