

# Chapter 1

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## Flirting with the Uncanny

Somewhere near the middle of the first volume of David Shahar's novel sequence *The Palace of Shattered Vessels*, the narrator describes a scene he witnessed many years before. He was a ten-year-old boy sitting on the verandah reading a book (Bialik's adaptation of *Don Quixote*) when judge Dan Gutkin, a Jewish magistrate under the British Mandate administration, came to pay a visit to the landlady, Mrs. Gentilla Luria, the widow of Yehuda Prosper Bey:

The Officer of the British Empire climbed the steps to the home of his old friend the Officer of the Ottoman Empire, who had departed this world only a few weeks before, reaching the verandah just as the Jerusalem widow of the departed was shutting herself in her room and her sister, Pnina, was drawing up the three-legged iron table standing in the middle of the flagged floor to the red plush armchair which had been kept up till then for the exclusive use of Yehuda Prosper Bey. As soon as he had seated himself in the armchair with his face toward the setting sun, Pnina hurried off to bring him some biscuits and a cold drink. (*Summer*, 101; 84)

This description, quite typical of Shahar's style, is replete with precise spatiotemporal notations and correlations. First, the immediate scene itself: Judge Gutkin reached the verandah "just as" Mrs. Luria "was shutting herself in her room"; "As soon as he had seated himself," her sister, Pnina, "hurried off" for refreshments. Then, the recent past of the individuals involved: the decease, several weeks earlier, of Yehuda Prosper Bey, which, among other

consequences, brought to an end his “exclusive use” of that particular armchair. The long-standing relationships among the characters, too, have an implicit temporal dimension: the judge had once been the Bey’s protégé, and Pnina had once been her sister’s rival for his affections. The reference to the two men as officers of two different empires enriches the passage with the notion of historical change, the British having displaced the Ottoman Empire in Palestine some eighteen years before the time of the scene (of course, both the publication of the book and the narrator’s recollection take place after a further change, with the State of Israel replacing the British Mandate). There is perhaps a touch of irony in that the officer of an empire on which the sun never sets should take a seat “facing the setting sun.” This particular detail evokes even more readily a symbolic sense of the waning of life toward decrepitude and death. Returning to the logic of the scene itself, the failure of Mrs. Luria to welcome her visitor in person is due to her reluctance to show the ravages that time and neglect brought on her physical appearance.

Taking this analysis one step farther, we might note that spatiotemporal-ity here is profoundly linked to notions of identity and potential rivalry. In a reality understood by empirical and rational principles, time is irreversible, and two entities cannot occupy the same place at the same time. Thus the Ottoman Empire had to give way to the British one, and unless Yehuda Prosper Bey had disappeared, Judge Dan Gutkin might not have been seated in his armchair.

This latter image, however, produces in the narrator at first a different, powerful reaction:

Meanwhile I was flooded with a sense of uncomprehending wonder, delightful and frightening at the same time, as if I had suddenly stepped into a magic palace, at the sight of the judge with his mane of white hair combed severely back from his forehead on both sides of the middle parting above the square-jawed assertiveness of his lean face, lowering his strong limbs into the armchair of the old Bey, who used to sit up excitedly and call out “Of course, of course” as he drew a large red handkerchief over his smoothly shaven, shining head to wipe away the beads of sweat sparkling like fireworks in the setting sun. The picture of the old Bey, as I had last seen him before his death, sitting on this red armchair with the checked scarf his Jerusalem wife had wrapped around his neck, his hoarse old voice shouting in impotent rage “Our master Moses, our master Moses,” superimposed itself on the picture of the judge sitting on the same old verandah in the same armchair without either picture blotting the other out, blurring or erasing its lines to the slightest degree, and my heart feared and expanded in an abundance of joyful wonder in the palace in which I had suddenly found myself. (101–102; 85)

The scene, then, is perceived as a telescoping of two moments in time, and the elation it produces in the narrator is attributable to an apparent victory over the destructive irreversibility of time and/or the mutual exclusion of personal identities. The characterization of his sense of wonder as “uncomprehending” suggests a perspective other than that of a ten-year-old boy. That it could be articulated retrospectively, at a distance of many years, is itself another implied triumph over mutability and oblivion. At the same time, this delayed coming-to-significance bears all of the hallmarks of that *Nachträglichkeit* Freud associated with the retroactive emergence of trauma.<sup>1</sup>

Several such moments, in which a person long lost seems to come back to life or is suddenly glimpsed in another, or a situation recurs with apparently the full force of its original occurrence, are to be found in *The Palace of Shattered Vessels*.<sup>2</sup> A reader of European literature will recognize here an experience (or a narrative trope) akin to, if not at all points identical to, Proustian privileged moments of remembrance or Wordsworthian “spots of time.” Shahar’s term here for such a moment is the word “palace,” a choice that may seem odd to the uninitiated but whose importance is underlined by its figuring in the general title of the novel sequence.

First it must be noted that the Hebrew word rendered here as “palace” is not *armon*, usually used to designate a royal abode, but *heikhal*, which can also mean “shrine,” that is, a holy place, and often is used in connection with the Holy Temple itself. More specifically, the key to the use of this term by Shahar is to be found in the literature of the Kabbala. Indeed, any reader alerted to this connection must recognize immediately that all the elements of the general title (as well as the subtitle, *Lurian*, dropped from later volumes but reintroduced in the revised edition) point in the same direction.<sup>3</sup> In early Kabbalistic literature, “Palaces” (*Heikhalot*) were texts describing the mystical ascension to the celestial palaces and the meeting with the “King of Kings”; the latter is depicted as seated on a celestial throne in the seventh of these palaces and is described in great anthropomorphic detail. Since the ascension of the mystic follows in reverse the process of creation, it leads him back from the world of plurality and particularization to the original divine unity.<sup>4</sup> We cannot, at this stage, point to any closer parallels between the *Heikhalot* literature of the second to fifth century A.D. and Shahar’s work. For our purpose here, suffice it to say that in this passage Shahar uses the word “palace” specifically to designate the locus of a quasimystical encounter. The centering of the scene on a father/judge figure on a thronelike seat also contributes to this parallel. What makes the experience mystical is the appearance of freedom from the limitations of empirical existence, in particular, from the irreversibility and destructiveness of time rather than any other divine attributes of power or holiness. And yet the mystical encounter occurs most emphatically on the ground of empirical reality. In Shahar’s fiction, on certain extraordinary but

not all-too-rare occasions, the divine, thus understood, is glimpsed precisely in the mundane.

The “abundance” (*shefa*) characteristic of such experiences is precisely the overdetermination or excess disallowed by a rational-empirical conception of reality governed by the law of excluded middle. And here, as elsewhere in *The Palace of Shattered Vessels*, this cannot last longer than a brief instant, as the text continues: “But the palace vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, and with it the picture of the old Bey, and I said to myself, ‘No, it’s quite impossible that this red chair should have room enough for both of them, the old man and the judge as well—and besides, the old man’s dead and gone’” (102; 85–86). Why should the exhilaration of the palace disappear so abruptly? The text presents it as a sober return to common sense, but surely that is just what the narrator’s consciousness had to take leave of in order to have its quasimystical experience in the first place. A stronger explanation is suggested by the ambivalence characterizing this experience from the start: it has always been both “delightful” and “fearful,” caused the heart to both “fear” and “expand.”

Affective ambivalence such as this often accompanies accounts of mystical experience. If transcending the destructive power of time appears desirable, then the abolition of the difference between life and death (and, even more so, between the living and the dead) can be felt as a threat to life. Likewise, the union with the absolute being of the divinity is the ultimate goal of mystical yearning, but at the same time it spells the dissolution of the subject’s personal identity. Certainly in Shahar, as our subsequent discussions will show, personal identity as the locus of desire is a *sine qua non*, the basis for any possible development. The awe inspired by the palace experience is also plain fear.

Such affective ambivalence characterizes as well the experience Freud discusses in his essay “The Uncanny” (“Das Unheimliche,” 1919). Freud there talks about situations where the subject is suddenly faced with an aspect of external reality that bears a powerful and close kinship with something buried deep in his unconscious (a repressed complex or a stage of development presumably long since overcome). When this aspect of reality assumes anthropomorphic features, the subject is faced with what has been called a “double.” Freud highlights the intense affective ambivalence elicited by such figures, giving it a temporal inflection. Originally, he writes, the double was “an insurance against the destruction of the ego,” “an energetic denial of the power of death,” but such belief in the indestructibility of the self is relinquished when the evidence of empirical reality begins to assert itself. The double then reverses its aspect, inspiring terror instead of joy: “From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.”<sup>5</sup>

Placing his poetic, personal version of the topos of the *Heikhal* so early in his text, Shahar invites us to consider it as emblematic of the work as a whole. We can then read the scene as indicative of a tension in his poetics between

two elements: on the one hand, an “adult,” prosaic commitment to a rational-empirical conception of reality; on the other hand, an ambivalent fascination with the suspension of rules governing such a reality.

Of course, the former, grown-up conception does not necessarily amount to a naive belief in a strictly “objective” reality, but it does presuppose a discrete self with a sensorium, a consciousness, and a memory relating to a world that is actually “out there,” a world of linear temporality and well-defined identities. Positing such a world is the foundation of realist poetics and, indeed, it is in his success as a mimetic writer that critics of Shahar often locate his unique power. Thus, for instance, the most assiduous of Shahar scholars, Sarah Katz:

For Shahar is, after all, one of the most gifted novelists in our literature, and he represents his creative world and the Jerusalem milieu in a manner so plastic and colorful, so authentic and convincing, that the fictional story appears to be literally true [*emet la-amita*]. Shahar’s characters are so fresh and credible, so energetic and lively, that the reader feels as though she has met them in reality, somewhere in the streets of Jerusalem or one of its neighborhoods, in a café, a garden, or one of their private basement love-nests.<sup>6</sup>

The other element, opposed to a rational-empirical conception of reality and to a straightforward mimetic poetics, is more complex and somewhat more difficult to describe. We believe it can be accounted for in three ways. First, it often appears as a mystical yearning to transcend or transgress the limitations of plain reality (but then, Shahar can no longer be committed to any traditional, let alone institutional, religious discipline). Second, and no less frequently, it may be construed as a privileging of what Freud called “primary process,” where time is reversible and distinctions between self and other tend to blur. Finally, it manifests itself in narrative patterns that, through repetition, doubling, and the blurring of borderlines, challenge the punctuality of events, the linearity of time, and the discrete existence of individuals. It is the interplay between these two commitments and the paradoxical representations that it generates that this chapter sets out to explore.

## NARRATIVE ORGANIZATION

The remarkable opening paragraph of *Summer in the Street of the Prophets* (and of the whole *Palace* sequence) posits as a general framework the voice of a narrator recounting experiences recalled from the past, by way of autobiographical, retrospective narration:

Light and cistern water, the mouth of the cave and the rock at its side: these four have been connected in my memory with the figure of Gabriel Jonathan Luria ever since the time he came to stay in our house when I was a child. From Paris he came straight to our house, and since he entered the yard just before the King of Abyssinia entered the Ethiopian Consulate across the road—which is to say, just as I was drawing water from the cistern—his figure was fixed in my memory as rising from its mouth together with the pail of water splashing radiant, dancing light in all directions, which I was drawing up with a peculiar kind of pleasure from its bottom: rising and opening like the Japanese paper flower in its glass of water which he himself was later to buy me from Hananiah's toy shop. (9; 7)

As a global motivating device, this framework allows for associative leaps and bounds, an episodic and nonlinear organization of plot materials, while at the same time not relinquishing the claim that the contents of these memories might be pieced together into some coherent reality. Wherever this reality does not meet the requirements of external verisimilitude, one expects it at least to be attributable to the consciousness of the narrator. The focus on consciousness may go so far as to make the very plot assume the appearance of being the story of this consciousness. Indeed, the very title of the work leads one to expect it to constitute a piecing together of memories and experiences into some sort of architectural whole.

At the center of the narrator's reminiscences stands Gabriel Jonathan Luria (who gave the sequence its subtitle "Lurian"), with whom the novel opens and who dominates the seventh and last "gate."<sup>7</sup> He is the son of old Yehuda Prosper Bey, former Consul of Spain in Jaffa, and his much younger wife, Gentilla, in whose house the narrator lives as a boy. The narrator meets Gabriel upon his return to Jerusalem after a long stay in France and tells of what he saw of him that summer, up to the moment at which Gabriel kills an Arab rioter, is arrested, and then is released. But the narrator also tells of Gabriel's life prior to his departure for France, especially his love for Orit (often called Orita) Gutkin, the beautiful and proud daughter of Judge Dan Gutkin, with whom he had a stormy love affair, as well as his concurrent liaison with Bella, the wife of Fat Pesach (co-owner of the Café Cancan). Following his ten-day fling with Orit at the King David Hotel, Gabriel leaves for France, ostensibly to study medicine; some time later, Orit (possibly pregnant by him) marries the much older Dr. Landau, a famous ophthalmologist. We are told also of Gabriel's life in France: upon finding out that he dropped out of medical school, his father cuts him off financially, and during the last year of his stay, he becomes a simple farmhand in Brittany.

The narrator was also acquainted in his childhood with some of Gabriel's friends, and he relates episodes from their lives prior to and following Gabriel's

departure: Israel (Srulik) Shoshan, the little librarian of the Bnei Brit library, whose long-standing dream to travel to Ur of the Chaldees, birthplace of the patriarch Abraham, is repeatedly frustrated by family mishaps and obligations, and who disappears one day from Jerusalem, only to return many years later as a Protestant doctor of theology and missionary; and Berl Raban, alias Eshbaal Ashtarot, an admirer of the biblical Joshua son of Nun, conqueror of Canaan, who works as Dr. Landau's assistant before deciding to devote himself entirely to the writing of poetry. In telling the story of these characters' desires and disappointments, the narrator digresses into the lives of their relatives and friends: Srulik's father, the carpenter nicknamed Temple-Builder; his sister Rina and her husband, the dance teacher Oded; his aunt, the coppersmith Elka, and her sister Ethel; Berl's brother, Haim Longlife, always excited by some new idea for a money-making invention; Berl's wife, the pretentious art critic and intellectual Lea Himmelsach; Shoshi Raban, the wife of the ultra-orthodox greengrocer Reb Itzhok, who discovers one day Berl's poetry and falls in love with him; Judge Gutkin and his other daughter, Yael (often called Yaeli); his Anglophile Arab chauffeur, Daoud, later killed by Gabriel, possibly with the same dagger that had killed Daoud's father a quarter of a century earlier; Wertheimer, a half-Jewish professor of Germanic mythology, who escaped from Germany when Hitler came to power, lives as a peddler in Jerusalem, becomes a British intelligence officer during World War II, and ends up a professor in Oxford; his friend, the violinist Brunhilde, who dies of cancer; Boulos Effendi, the rich Arab antique dealer; William Gordon, chief of a British police station in Jerusalem, whose passion for photography brings about his death during the riots in the summer of 1936; and Louidor the Silent, whose unrequited love for Yaeli Gutkin as well as his disappointment at finding Eretz Israel full of Arabs leads to his conversion to Islam and subsequently to his murder. Later volumes expand the story to include the next generation: Berl's daughter Nin-Gal, whom the narrator loved in his childhood and who dies mysteriously at an early age; his son Tammuz Ashtarot, the narrator's school-mate and best friend, who may or may not be the same person as a drama critic named Thomas Astor he encounters many years later in Paris; Arik Wissotzky, another school friend of the narrator and of Tammuz, also encountered later on in Paris; and Orit's granddaughter, Yaeli Landau, who may be mysteriously connected to Tammuz/Thomas.

## CHRONOLOGY

Shahar's rhetoric often highlights the various "spatial" relations of analogy between characters and events, but insofar as his narrative invites a conventional mimetic reading, it calls for a chronological piecing together of these life

fragments, an attempt to construct the sequence of events that makes up the main trajectory of the plot.

This attempt at chronological construction must hinge on the scene opening the text, a scene that posits the promise of a chronological referent with particular force. For this scene anchors the narrator's personal experience in *historical* reality: the day on which the narrator, then a ten-year-old boy, was so impressed by the return from Paris of Gabriel Luria, so we are told, was the very same day on which Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia made his entry to Jerusalem (9; 7). This latter event can be easily looked up in historical records: fleeing from the Italian invasion of his country, the emperor came to Jerusalem on May 8, 1936.<sup>8</sup>

By the middle of volume 3 (*Day of the Countess*), we realize that the crucial point toward which the various narrative strands lead is a particular day later that summer, a day branded as the "enchanted day" (52). This is the day on which Gabriel came with Orit to the Café Gat and played Brunhilde's violin in the street outside, the day Wertheimer sold that violin to Boulos Effendi, and the day the narrator discovered the volume of poems by Eshbaal Ashtarot under the peacock ashtray made by Elka. This day, too, presumably is anchored in public historical record: it is said by the narrator to be exactly eight days prior to the outbreak of violence in Jerusalem as part of the Arab Uprising (referred to in Zionist historiography as the 1936 Riots).

Such cross-references are not absent from the later volumes of the sequence. Thus in volume 7 (*Of Candles and Winds*), as Gabriel is in his basement, deep in the study of Spinoza, Bella breaks in with the shocking news: "They murdered Brenner" (105). In fact, Chaim Yossef Brenner was murdered on May 2, 1921. This invites us to date several fictional ongoing: Lord Radcliffe's visit to Jerusalem; Gabriel's affair with Bella; and his fateful fling with Orit at the King David Hotel. In *The Nights of Lutetia*, upon being invited to celebrate that lady's fortieth birthday, the narrator comments that she is as old as the State of Israel (28). His stay in Paris and his second meeting with Tammuz/Thomas must therefore take place in 1988.

Such references to external chronology invite us to consider the personal fictional narrative as an integral part of general history. If so, we might expect this private story to consist of discrete events that occupy specific points along the axis of time. However, if we proceed on such assumptions in the attempt to locate other fictional events, we run into considerable difficulty. In some cases, the relative temporal position of important events becomes problematic when we try to correlate them with such external references.

Thus two of the major characters of the whole saga, Gabriel and Srulik, disappear from Jerusalem in separate events, only to run into each other again years later in France, before one of them, Gabriel, makes his return to Jerusalem (Srulik will return, too, but only some twenty years later). Srulik's



disappearance is not dated in the text. The story of his experiences in Jerusalem continues for several years after Gabriel's departure for France, since his desire to travel to Ur of the Chaldees is reawakened for the last time when Orita has long been married and is mother to a three-year-old daughter (*Voyage*, 125; 354; she was unmarried and childless when Gabriel left). Elsewhere, Gabriel's return after a nine-year stay (*Voyage*, 190; 428) is said to be "long after" Srulik's disappearance (*Voyage*, 38; 252); this would put Srulik's disappearance somewhere near the middle of Gabriel's absence from Jerusalem. Srulik's disappearance can also be related to several other events. "A week or two before he disappeared," he discussed with the narrator himself the visit to the studio of his Aunt Elka by Yehuda Prosper Bey in the company of Sir Ronald Storrs, identified in the text as "formerly governor of Jerusalem and now governor of Cyprus" (*Day of the Countess*, 11). During this memorable visit, Storrs mentions a conversation he has had with Lawrence (of Arabia) only "last week," in which the latter maintained that the only people worthy of one's admiration were artists and creators. Some time during the same period, and certainly while Aunt Elka was still alive, the narrator was asked by Srulik to fetch from her house Sir Leonard Woolley's book *Abraham*. So far, so good: there is no violation of *internal* temporal coherence.

Since Storrs, Lawrence, and Woolley were actual historical figures, the appeal to historical chronology seems to be warranted. But when we try to map the sequence onto external chronological indications, things begin to show signs of crumbling. In his autobiography, Storrs (who was governor of Cyprus from 1926 to 1932) mentions that particular conversation with Lawrence, dating it September 1926.<sup>9</sup> Since Woolley's *Abraham* was not published until 1936,<sup>10</sup> Srulik's disappearance would have to be dated soon after September 1926 and not before 1936, a full ten-year discrepancy. Either one of these dates would also contradict, of course, the aforementioned correlation with Gabriel's absence. Rather than disappearing at some point around the middle of Gabriel's absence from Jerusalem, Srulik's disappearance would have to be dated either just prior to Gabriel's departure (c. 1927) or around the time of his return (1936). Furthermore, if the narrator was about ten years old upon Gabriel's return in 1936, he must have been a babe in arms when he heard from Srulik about Storrs's recent visit to Elka's studio (externally dated 1926) and was asked to fetch Woolley's book (not published until ten years later).

There are other such cruxes in the eight volumes of the *Palace*, where references to historical chronology lead to contradictions in the construction of the fable.<sup>11</sup> It is quite possible that some of these inconsistencies are due to authorial oversight, or the gradual elaboration of the plot in the author's mind over a period of some twenty-five years. Indeed, in revising his text for the definitive edition, Shahar addressed himself to some issues of this kind (cf. note 13 below). Our pointing out these details is not offered in a spirit of

pedantic fault finding. The fact remains, however, that it is the author who insistently studs his text with such external chronological notations. Taken together, these notations add up to a sense that it is important to him to anchor his narrative in documented historical reality. At the same time, the existence of such discrepancies indicates that the author's fictional creation and/or the characters' subjective experiences do not easily fit into a consistent, linear mold. To use the central conceit of the work as a whole, if empirical reality is the vessel then the poetics of verisimilitude cannot quite contain the overabundance of imaginative energy.

But inconsistencies also may be noted when we try to piece together *inter-nal* temporal indications rather than just relate them to external chronology. Gabriel's return from Paris coincides not only with Haile Selassie's entry to Jerusalem but also with the narrator's act of drawing water from the cistern. In remembering that particular occasion, the narrator emphasizes the particular care he took not to spill any of the water. This is related directly to the anxious watching by Pnina, Gabriel's old aunt, of the decreasing water level in the cistern located beneath the house. Her present cause for concern is contrasted with last year's: "The year before we worried about floods. . . . But this year was dry and rainless" (*Summer*, 10–11; 8–9). Dry and rainy years can alternate in Jerusalem, then, and Gabriel's return happened to take place on a dry year.<sup>12</sup> In the next paragraph, however, we find him standing at the window, "smoking one of his Latif cigarettes and looking out at the rain pouring down in a steady beating rhythm as if it would never stop" (11; 9). The worry here is that the cistern may not be large enough to contain the abundance of water, so that the house erected over it might be in danger of crumbling. It is conceivable, of course, that having returned on a particular day in a dry year, Gabriel should have stayed in Jerusalem long enough to witness a rainy one. At the very least, however, it should be noted that there is no textual indication whatsoever that the time of the occurrence has shifted. If anything, the association of excessive rain with the previous year creates the odd impression that Gabriel was somehow there to say some particular words that have some particular effect on the narrator the year prior to his actual return.<sup>13</sup>

The oddity is that while, on the one hand, the narrator expends considerable effort in anchoring each event and each experience in a specific time and place, on the other hand, the characters appear to lead a ghostly life that at times seems to float rather freely over this meticulous spatiotemporal grid. A partial motivation for this kind of freefloating scene is its attachment to temporal realities that are in principle iterative or repetitive (the four-season cycle reiterated each year, with the possible alternation of rainy with dry winters; iterative situations such as sitting on the verandah or standing guard with a comrade during military service; event types repeated in the course of the plot, such as wars and journeys abroad). However, if verisimilitude is the desired

effect, the problem still remains: the year of Gabriel's return could be either a dry or rainy one, but not both.

There is, however, a sense in which it hardly matters whether the cistern is depleted or overfull. Either one of these eventualities is fraught with unease, and both are allayed by the actual or remembered presence of Gabriel Luria:

"Yes, yes," he said, showing no signs of making ready for the necessary plugging operations, "the vessels will never be able to contain the abundance," and I was for some reason reassured, sinking into a strange kind of calm acceptance that this, in fact, was the way things were. Just as my anxiety lest the cistern be emptied left me now at the sight of his face appearing suddenly as if rising from the pail and the sound of his saying, "Yes, yes. The vessels are emptying." (11; 10)

Passages such as this indicate that what matters here most is positing—and overcoming—the opposition excess/dearth rather than this or that eventuality. This applies not only on the psychological level, in the narrator's relation to Gabriel, but also on a more general, symbolic level. The text establishes a metaphorical equation of water and light: the inability of the cisterns to contain the excess of water has its equivalent in Gabriel's eventual eye condition, "when his eyes were no longer able to bear the abundance of the light" (*Summer* 12; 10). In Lurianic Kabbala, the "shattered vessels" are the lower of the ten spheres, which could not contain the abundance of light in the process of creation. But the absence of any such light would have meant that no creation occurred at all. Gabriel, who is described as a source of "comforting emanation, instilling security and joy in which he abounds," and who is enigmatically said to have been "the author of 'The Palace of Shattered Vessels'" (*Summer*, 19; sentence omitted from the English and French translation but not from the definitive edition), is also the first and foremost "shattered vessel" in Shahaḥ's *Palace*.

Often, inner temporal contradictions result from the telescoping of several (possibly mutually exclusive) occurrences or events into a more or less limited time/space. Thus under the designation "Summer in the Street of the Prophets," at least three summers are conflated, confused, or superimposed: the summer of Gabriel's return from France, the summer of his departure, and the summer of Sruḥik's last dream of Ur. However, inner temporal contradictions also occur when a relatively short and well-demarcated period of time (between two punctual, decisive events) is overcrowded with occurrences (and especially repetitive ones) beyond the limits of verisimilitude. This happens in the initial description of the narrator's introduction to the Luria household. The narrator and his family, we are told, have moved into an apartment in Mrs. Luria's house only a few weeks before Gabriel's return. This relatively

short period of time is further divided by another punctual event—the death of the old Bey, Gabriel's father, which took place several weeks before Gabriel's return (*Summer*, 36; 29), hence, soon after the narrator had moved in. Yet the narrative describing the short period between the narrator's coming to live in the house and the return of Gabriel, or the even shorter period between the death of the father and the return of the son, gives the unmistakable impression that a long time has elapsed, a time during which the narrator has become an intimate member of the household: "Ever since her husband's death, but especially since the old judge had wound up the affair of her inheritance to her complete satisfaction, Mrs. Luria had become so worried about her finances that she had stopped sending her son any money at all, and contented herself with sending him parcels tied up with whole balls of string which I would carry to the post office for her" (*Summer*, 166; 151). Parcels did not go by air-mail in those days.

Similarly, the relatively short period between Gabriel's return from France (a day of great importance, at least for the narrator) and the beginning of the riots in Jerusalem on the fatal day in which "the world was divided in two" (*Voyage* 194; 433) is filled with an overabundance of incident. According to the narrative sequence told at the end of *Voyage* and the beginning of *Day of the Countess*, about two weeks separated these two turning points. Orit first saw Gabriel a week after his return (*Voyage*, 189; 428, "ten days or a fortnight," according to *Voyage*, 167; 401). The day following their first meeting was the "enchanted day" (*Countess*, 52), and that, we are told, was eight days before the eruption of violence that brought about the death of Gordon and Daoud (*Countess*, 41).

*Day of the Ghosts*, too, covers the same time period, in fact ending on a verbatim repetition of the description of the riots as given at the end of *Day of the Countess*. But new characters and new events have been introduced into this short interval. We are told (in *Ghosts*) of Gabriel's half-serious attempt to help Lea Himmelsach, Berl's wife, whose previous attempts to "mount the barricades" in order to bring progress to the Arab populace have been frustrated by her ignorance of the Arabic language. Gabriel suggests that she launch her mission by addressing those Arabs who were educated by German missionaries. Lea accepts; a first meeting is organized in Gabriel's house; a second meeting takes place a week later in the Bnei Brit library, following which Daoud drives Lea back home and is "seduced" by her into a sexual encounter (a seduction that is presented as contributing to his turning against the Jews and thus explains his participation, soon after, in the Arab riots). The impression fostered by this section is of a Gabriel long since back in Jerusalem, an active member of a social set; it is hard to imagine all of these developments occurring in a period of two to three weeks.

The difficulty increases if we assume that this brief span also saw the “benefit” concert Gabriel held in his house on Brunhilde’s birthday. There is no direct indication in the novel when this event happened (it is mentioned several times, e.g., *Countess*, 126; *Nin-Gal*, 138), but this could not be before Gabriel left for France (presumably around 1927), since Wertheimer and Brunhilde only came to Palestine with Hitler’s takeover. Moreover, Gabriel explicitly compares and contrasts his effort and motives in organizing these two affairs (*Ghosts*, 110), thus suggesting their proximity in time. A week after Gabriel’s return, however, Brunhilde is already dead: on the “enchanted day” Wertheimer sells her violin to Boulos Effendi to raise money for her tombstone. Brunhilde’s concert and the events surrounding it can hardly fit into this chronological straitjacket. In order to accommodate the narrative impression of iteration and duration, we have to “forget,” or at least shift, one of the punctual events demarcating this period—Gabriel’s return, the “enchanted day,” the riots.

But the events demarcating those miraculous two weeks during which so much is supposed to have transpired are not indifferent occurrences that might simply be shifted around to make as much room as would be reasonably necessary for everything to happen. They are repeatedly characterized as exceptional moments. We have already alluded to the day of Gabriel’s return to Jerusalem and its internal as well as external chronological correlations. As the narrator resumes his narrative in chapter 2 of *Summer in the Street of the Prophets*, he insists on the momentousness of the event: “I saw Gabriel Jonathan Luria for the first time on a great and strange day in my life” (*Summer*, 23; 19). He then goes on to repeat the correlation with his own act of drawing water and with Haile Selassie’s entry into the Ethiopian Consulate. The same phrase is repeated at the end of chapter 7, as the narrator once more recalls “the first time I saw Gabriel Jonathan Luria on a great and strange day in my life, the day on which my eyes beheld, on the other side of the street, the King of Kings Haile Selassie, Elect of God, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Emperor of Ethiopia, in the middle of summer in the year 5696 from the Creation of the world, 1936 according to the Christian calendar” (*Summer*, 150; 136). A substantial portion of this sentence is repeated verbatim in the beginning of chapter 4 of *A Voyage to Ur of the Chaldees* (157; 388).<sup>14</sup> Each time the text insists on its being the *first* time the narrator actually saw Gabriel Luria, a meeting that affected him for the rest of his life.

The miraculously eventful fortnight comes to an end on the day the riots broke out in Jerusalem. It may not be irrelevant to note that, historically, the 1936 Arab Rebellion was triggered earlier that year and away from Jerusalem, and that no riot similar to the one Shahar describes here is documented in easily accessible records.<sup>15</sup> The momentousness of the particular day he

describes is, then, a compositional feature of his own fictional creation, and it would be hard to outdo his highlighting of the significance and irreversibility of that day, “the day of the outbreak of the riots [*meora’ot*, literally, “events”] that split the world and time in two, a day that became a turning point in Gabriel’s life no less than it was Berl’s day” (*Countess*, 135). This sentence echoes a previous one in which the narrator demarcates the period in question, with Gabriel’s image rising before him “as I first beheld it on the day of his homecoming, and as it remained until the events that split the world and time in two” (*Voyage*, 194; 433).

One expectation powerfully raised by this kind of emphasis is that subsequent portions of the narrative should tell us about Gabriel’s later experiences, and that these should be significantly different from those that transpired till then. Thus the day of the riots was also said to be Berl’s day (*Countess*, 135, quoted above), and the change in this character’s life is indeed remarkable: having resigned from his position in Dr. Landau’s clinic, he moves out of his home and into Mrs. Luria’s cellar to devote himself entirely to the writing of poetry; later volumes suggest that he has subsequently gained wide recognition as a poet. But of Gabriel’s life after his killing Daoud, his arrest, and his release, we are told next to nothing. From volume 4 on, he is largely relegated to the background, and when he does reemerge as the protagonist in *Of Candles and Winds*, it is only as the subject of events prior to his homecoming and the day that “split the world and time in two.” All that we ever learn of his life after 1936 concerns the deterioration of his eyesight and some meetings with the narrator, during which he tells him of earlier periods in his life. A curious detail is that Gabriel seems to be absent from his mother’s funeral (which must have taken place after 1936), since Blum, the pharmacist, on that occasion, voices to the narrator his displeasure with himself for not having asked the deceased lady for her son’s address while she was still alive.<sup>16</sup> In brief, after that *annus mirabilis* of 1936, Gabriel hardly seems to exist in the world and time of the *Palace*. In contrast, we might note that the character of Srulik does reappear on a much later date in the fable. Some twenty years after his disappearance from Jerusalem, now the Protestant clergyman Dr. Shoshan, he comes to David Shahar’s door to urge him to translate into Hebrew a *Life of Calvin* (as Shahar, both in the fiction and in real life, had translated some book on Zen), and in the various meetings that ensue, he tells the narrator of his life after his conversion.

Gabriel’s presence in the life of the narrator (which is, to a large extent, the “subject” of the story) does not, then, fit easily into a temporal narrative with a beginning, a middle (a turning point), and an end; yet the narrative also insists precisely on these moments in their punctuality, uniqueness, and irreversibility. Though in a general way we can attribute this to the incommensurability between the requirements of the imagination or desire and those of

empirical reality, it is not easy to sort out which elements of the text belong to one category or the other. Both the temporal grid—with its precise notations—and the events (detailed, varied, iterative) that should, but do not quite, fit within it can be claimed with equal justice to obey either one of these logics.

## IDENTITIES

During those stretches of fable time from which Gabriel is absent, it is the figure of the narrator that to some extent assumes his role. The narrator is not just the witnessing and remembering character for those times but also the traveler (specifically to France) and the lover—as Luria had been before him. One should note, however, that even if the narrator is seen as in some sense stepping into Gabriel's shoes, the emphatic “splitting of the world and time in two” is not substantiated by any narrative material about him either. This substitution can be explained in various ways. The narrator has become *like* Gabriel, since Gabriel was his admired example, his role model; imitating Gabriel and Gabriel's desires, the narrator takes his place. Conversely, one can argue that Gabriel is not so much a model in the real world as the narrator's ideal self, a fictional projection of his wishes and desires. In the first case, the narrator is shaped or created by Gabriel; in the latter, it is Gabriel who is created, or imagined into fictional being, by the narrator. However we explicate the substitution, Gabriel and the narrator, with all of their similarities, remain distinct (whether as model and imitation, or as self and ideal).

There are, however, numerous places where the narrator and Gabriel are conflated in ways that cannot be easily explained by either one of these logics. Thus on occasion, experiences attributed to one of them are elsewhere predicated of the other. For example, the text narrates twice Mrs. Luria's griping over what happened during her weekly visit to the eye clinic: in the very midst of administering her eyedrops, Dr. Landau became involved in a dispute over a biblical verse with his assistant, Berl. But while on one of these occasions the addressee of this harangue is her son, Gabriel (*Voyage*, 168–69; 402), on the other, clearly referring to the very same event as having happened “two days ago,” it is the narrator (*Countess*, 13). Similarly, in the early volumes, the narrator recalls time and again his visits to the Bnei Brit library and the late afternoon meals, largely consisting of canned foods sent from America, that Srulik's aunts arranged there and that these ladies liked to call “by the elegant title of ‘five o'clock tea’” (*Voyage*, 17; 233). Much later in the text, as Gabriel returns to the library some time in 1936 for Lea Himmelsach's attempt to enlighten the Arabs in dialectical materialism, he, too, reflects nostalgically on those meals, with both the canned foods and the “elegant title of ‘five o'clock tea’” figuring in the text (*Ghosts*, 134).

These instances of conflation suggest a relation between the narrator and Gabriel at once more superficial and more intimate: it is as though in the routine events of everyday life the two are one and the same. Indeed, the narrator claims that in some sense they are one and the same person. The first sentence of the novel evokes the figure of Gabriel as the narrator saw him when “he came to stay in our house when I was a child. From Paris he came straight to our house” and entered the yard when the boy-narrator was drawing water from the cistern (*Summer*, 9; 7). The narrator, however, is quick to “correct” himself, pointing out that “our house” is actually Gabriel’s house: “On that very day Mr. Luria had returned from Paris to his late father’s house—for our house was, in fact, his father’s house, and the well we drank from was his childhood well” (*Summer*, 23; 19). The opening sentence also calls the well (or cistern, *bor*) one of the “four fathers of memory” (9; 7; missing in translation). The narrator’s (metaphorical) well of memory is, then, Gabriel’s (actual) well, so that when he draws from it, it is, in fact, not just his own childhood but also Gabriel’s that “he” remembers. When we add to this the frequent equation in the novel between house and body, the narrator’s claim that “our” house is, in fact, Gabriel’s house leads us to the conclusion that, in some sense, the two are actually one, body and soul.<sup>17</sup>

The narrator also seems to be conflated with the character of Srulik. Reflecting on Ber’s suggestion that the Arab dervish, or *willi*, they both saw by Jaffa Gate was actually Loudior the Silent, the narrator comments that this character “disappeared from my mind and Jerusalem and the life of Yaeli many years ago” (*Countess*, 94). However, since this disappearance took place “many years ago” the boy narrator, who is ten years old at the time he sees the *willi* in the Jaffa Gate, could not have had any personal recollection of the actual Loudior and his unrequited love for Yaeli Gutkin. Rather, it was Srulik who overheard from behind a partition Loudior’s confession to the laundress Rosa of his unfortunate encounter with Yaeli Gutkin (*Countess*, 113 ff.), so that the mind in question is, in that sense, his.<sup>18</sup>

A similar conflation occurs when we juxtapose two scenes involving the Café Gat. In the later of these, a preamble to the “enchanted day,” the narrator goes to the Café Gat on Mrs. Luria’s orders to fetch Gabriel away from Orit’s company for lunch at home (*Countess*, 32). On arrival there, he notes (in the first person) the absence of Gabriel and Orit and the presence of “three people out there under the marquee” (*Countess*, 34): William James Gordon, chief of the Mahaneh Yehuda police station, with his camera; and Boulos Effendi, about to conclude the sale of Brunhilde’s violin with Wertheimer (34). In the earlier Café Gat scene, Srulik passes by on his way to an important appointment. In the ensuing account (narrated in free indirect discourse from Srulik’s point of view), Orit’s and Gabriel’s absence is noted; Boulos Effendi is in a corner smoking his houka, and by the bar Gordon is showing



Joseph Shwili, the owner, his photos of Jericho and Wadi Kelt (*Voyage*, 90–91; 314–15). After some further associative digressions, which take the narrative far afield both chronologically and geographically, to a point decades later in a shop in Amsterdam, where Srulik is overcome with emotion at the sight of a fashion watch that reminds him of Haim Longlife's old ambition to patent such watches, the text returns Srulik to the Café Gat moment: "He suddenly realized that the tears he was shedding were not only in memory of Haim Longlife, but also in memory of the boy he had once been, nearly fifty years before; the boy to whom I now return, as he peered into the doorway of the Café Gat on his way to the Café Cancan" (*Voyage*, 104; 331). As the narrative point of view changes abruptly from that of Srulik to that of the narrator, a curious confusion occurs between the two: at the time of "his" Café Gat scene, Srulik was not a boy but a man in his mid-twenties, and so the boy "he" remembers with tears cannot be the boy to whom the narrator "now return[s], as he peered into the doorway of the Café Gat." If anyone was still a boy witnessing three men in the Café Gat, it must have been the narrator, and on a different occasion.

The similarity between these two café experiences is both less and more meaningful than an ordinary plot analogy. Less meaningful, because for two individuals to see people at a café on different occasions is quite plausible and does not in itself generate any significant plot development or suggest a thematic analogy. However, it is precisely the cumulative repetition in both scenes of details that are in themselves poor in significance that suggests an odd conflation of the character of Srulik with that of the narrator. This repetition tends to evoke in the reader's mind an odd question: "Whose memory is this, after all, and of whose experience?"

## UNCANNY PHOTO

From this double scene, the chains of repetition extend in still other directions by means of memory and representation. When Gordon invites Srulik to enter the café and look at pictures of Jericho, the young man first declines in spite of "a delicate feeling invading him at the sound of 'Jericho'"; then, leaning forward, he sees "three people sitting next to the mirror that took up the whole of the inner wall," and this makes him change his mind (*Voyage* 91; 315). The text never names the three people. If they are the same three observed before—Gordon, Shwili, and Boulos—as the English translator assumes (and which is quite unlikely, given their different positions in the café and the fact that Gordon is addressing Srulik), then it remains unclear what caused Srulik to change his mind. The allusion to "a delicate feeling invading him at the sound of 'Jericho'" points us, however, in a different direction. This

allusion introduces into the present scene the memory of another, earlier scene of *Srulik himself* sitting in the Café Gat with Orit and her sister Yaeli (after a plan to go together to Jericho had to be canceled); finding himself next to the beautiful Orit was “a dream too good to be true, his dearest wish . . . suddenly realized” (92; 316–17). What Srulik then “sees” in the Café Gat that persuades him to stay is an image of a moment in his past life when his dearest wish was fulfilled—and both the image of the past and the fulfillment of his wish appear to him in the real world and in the present (though the presence of a mirror in the vicinity may suggest, allegorically, the imaginary or subjective nature of this appearance).

Just as Srulik’s Café Gat scene is doubled by an earlier scene in his memory, so the boy-narrator’s Café Gat scene will be doubled by both a personal memory and a photograph. To appreciate the conceptual network governing this narrative sequence, we must backtrack to the point where the account of the child-narrator’s Café Gat experience begins. We recall that he was sent there by Mrs. Luria to fetch Gabriel away from Orita to lunch at home (32), and that his narration of this sequence is intertwined with his recollection of the first time he read Eshbaal Ashtarot’s poems, which in turn is related to the goings-on at the eye clinic on the day Berl quit his job there to devote himself to poetry. The narrator recalls some reflections he had then (he must have been quite a precocious ten-year-old boy) on the metaphysics of body and soul in its specific relation to the organ of sight. The paradox he reflects upon is that our “spiritual pleasure . . . of light with all its colors and shades” depends on a “ball of flesh”—the eye (*Countess*, 33). His recent experience at the eye clinic (the sight of the Arab boy’s dislodged eye) has led him to realize how fragile this piece of flesh is. Hence, his following thought (or wish):

This reflection did arise in me as a sort of flickering sense that it may be possible to have sensations and feelings and visions and melodies which are not of this world, without the mediation of the body, but the possibility of this indeterminate, disembodied being, hovering in empty space between nothing and nothing, frightened me so much, that I repressed it immediately, opening wide both my eyes in a wonderful sense of relief at their being both in excellent health. (*Countess*, 33–34)

Alluring as the idea of visions and sensations that do not depend on physical reality may be, the narrator recoils from it in panic. Both the eye and what it wants to see may lead a precarious existence in physical reality but must nevertheless be anchored in it; the possibility of an experience that is beyond or outside of this reality (such as the “palace” experience) is briefly considered and rejected.

These general reflections on vision and physical reality remind the narrator of Dr. Landau's philological inquiry into a possible biblical distinction between physical and moral blindness and send him on his journey to the university library in search of this article. As he makes his way across Jerusalem, he feels at odds with the world around him: all that was valuable and worth preserving is gone—Orita is dead. The response to this loss is a retreat to the world of "memories and thoughts and imaginings and reflections and dreams" (55), where he can still find her. But as his musings continue, they betray a growing dissatisfaction with mere spiritual entities, whether internalized or not:

Surely even if [Orita] subsists as a disembodied soul, the eyes of the flesh cannot see her since she is outside the world of matter, and if she did become clothed in another, new body, we can all be quite sure of her being so changed, that not only could I not recognize her, but she herself could not recognize herself nor remember anything at all of her previous metamorphosis. (*Countess*, 55)

Without a stable adherence of personal identity to perceptible shape, nothing can have value in Shahar's world.

At the same time, by a nefarious irony, so familiar from Romantic and post-Romantic literature, those perceptible shapes that the author in his personal identity here and now finds himself surrounded by all seem to him ugly, alien, corrupt, degraded, and even directly hostile. The sight of the building housing the eye clinic, where he once had some moving experiences, fails to move him now. People at the bus stop push and shove. Still more depressingly, the article cannot be found after a three-hour search in the library. Smoking a cigarette and staring at some long-haired students on the Hebrew University campus lawn, the author is driven back into his private literary world:

Suddenly it dawned on me that this dejection stemmed neither from the elbows that had pushed me getting on the bus nor from the failure of my search for Dr. Landau's article which may never have been published, but from the very interruption of my writing the story of that day and my going out into the reality of this day. . . . Just as there is little chance that walking down the street today I would meet Gordon or Daoud Ibn Mahmoud, who were both killed at the beginning of the 1936 riots . . . so there is little chance that I would find today in the National Library a trace [memory trace, *zekher*] to Dr. Landau's linguistic theories. This world here and now not only would not aid me in constructing that other world but, on the contrary,

would prevent me from concentrating on it, and I have no choice but to escape it as soon as possible. (*Countess*, 58)

It may be tempting to take this passage as a programmatic declaration of Shahar's poetics,<sup>19</sup> which would then appear as a particularly maudlin version of the escape into subjectivity and rejection of the outside world. "This world here and now" seems not just indifferent to the heart's desire but actively hostile to it in some sort of universal conspiracy. All the author can do is withdraw into the world of his memory, where he can retrieve the images that are dear to him. The passage seems to suggest that the whole literary project of the *Palace* is the outcome of this activity in the medium of writing.

But again, the point is that the turn inward is presented as a rather reluctant last resort. The author cannot really be content with memory traces of absent entities; his desire is for nothing less than a reappearance of his past in the here and now of the present. The object made present again need not be desirable in itself (like the figure of Orita); it may be devoid of any special emotional investment (like Gordon or Daoud) as long as it brings back to life the author's own past. Aware, in the adult rational part of his mind, that even this is too much to ask, he denies this wish (much as the "palace" experience we analyzed in the beginning of this chapter gave way to a sense of the impossibility of the dead Bey and the living judge occupying the same chair at the same time). This, then, is the dilemma that shapes Shahar's poetics: on the one hand, an uncompromising desire to preserve his past and, on the other hand, a refusal to accomplish this only in the purely mental realm of subjectivity, the literary equivalent of which would be indulging in fantasies of wish fulfillment and pure fictionality.

It is against this background that we can appreciate the full import of the surprise for which "this world here and now" sets him up. Among the bric-a-brac offered for sale on the campus plaza by a young Englishman, he spots a photograph of the monastery of Saint George in Wadi Kelt. As he turns the photograph over to look for a mark of its origin, he comes face-to-face with another picture, hitherto screened by it:

All at once I was flooded by an abundance of wistful longing that squeezed my heart and I felt that my eyes were filling with tears. Boulos Effendi was watching me [*nishkaf elai*] from the photograph, sitting under the marquee, one hand holding a houka and the other on the violin, in an unexpected materialization here and now—and even if it is only a realization by means of a picture it still has the concrete materiality of a picture and its form in the external world—of the tale of memory that was interrupted by this very external world