

# *Airing Literature: Reading with the Sense of Smell*

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**ABSTRACT:** The current essay suggests a form of reading inspired by both the sense of smell and the phenomenon of smell. It is composed of two theoretical parts. The first aims at formulating a comparative model deriving from the conceptual history of smell and from its attributes as a physical phenomenon. The second theoretical part examines the peculiar materiality of smell as part of an atmosphere and the possible implications it might have on the link/rupture between literature and life. Finally, it brings the theory into practice, reading a story from the Israeli literary canon, attempting to air it and present alternatives to its familiar, canonical readings and interpretations.

**W**HAT CAN THE SENSE OF SMELL tell us about comparative literature? How can smell help us think anew the link between literature and life? And how can it help us air the literary canon? In the following essay I would like to suggest a reading of smell, or a smell-reading, attempting to pave new paths for the study of literature today. I will do so, after a short introduction of olfactory literary studies, by thinking of the comparativity of smell as an object and as a metaphor, following David Damrosch's discussion in *Comparing the Literatures*. I will then turn to consider how thinking with smell can help us think anew the link between literature and life, working with the new theoretical corpus that has been recently named the "atmospheric turn". After these theoretical discussions, I will put theory into practice by interpreting a story from the national canon of modern Israeli fiction, Avraham B. Yehoshua's "Mul ha-ye'arot" (Facing the Forests), attempting to air up both the story and the canon. I'll conclude with the possible political potentialities of reading with the sense of smell, bringing thus practice back into theory.

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## 1. SMELL AND LITERATURE: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

Literature has always been an important locus for smells from East to West.<sup>1</sup> The literary study of smell and of olfactory experience, however, is still in its early stages and could be regarded as minor. Nevertheless, interesting works on smell in literature have been published in the past thirty years: Rindisbacher, Carlisle, and Friedman researched the sense of smell in European literature, in different periods and genres.<sup>2</sup> Hsu, Babilon, and Looby have researched smell and olfaction in American literature, marking race, gender, class, power relations, and environmental risks as pivotal to the literary study of smell.<sup>3</sup> These works contributed important and innovative readings of smell in various contexts and began to establish the importance of the research of smell in literature. But there is still much work to be done, especially on the theoretical level, and specifically in comparative literature. The current essay wishes to step into this theoretical gap by offering a comparative reading method inspired by the conceptual history of smell and its attributes as a physical phenomenon. It also aims at expanding the theory of smell regarding its atmospheric, airborne nature—stressing the importance of various material and literary atmospheres that surround us and are usually neglected and degraded, exploring their political potential in the context of Israel/Palestine.

The developing field of olfactory literary studies is part of a larger, newly formed, and growing field of olfactory studies in the humanities. Its development can be traced back to the mid-1980s,<sup>4</sup> and only in the past ten years has it gained significant scholarly attention, thanks to the material and sensory turns in the humanities in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the study of smell and olfaction is part of a greater attempt in the humanities to shift toward the material world and the ways in which humans experience it—through the senses. Nevertheless, while other material fields have flourished in the past decades (sound studies, visual culture studies, food studies, object-oriented ontology),<sup>6</sup> smell has still been marginalized. Its fleeting and transitory nature, as well as its traditional cultural neglect, have made smell a challenging object for researchers, who often choose to ignore it. But at the same time, these exact qualities have made smell—as a phenomenon and as a sense—a worthy object for the study of transitory and fleeting beings and phenomena, of cultural and historical neglect, of microscopic, invisible materialities, and of a unique kind of embodied cognition, knowledge, and poetics.

<sup>1</sup> Here are just a few examples from the vast and rich literary representations of smell and odors in the history of literature: *Gilgamesh*; Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; *Shir ha-shirim* [The song of songs]; Hafez's liturgical poems; various works of French symbolism; detective fiction; naturalism; and many more genres and masterpieces.

<sup>2</sup> Hans J. Rindisbacher, *The Smell of Books: A Cultural-Historical Study of Olfactory Perception in Literature* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Janice Carlisle, "The Smell of Class: British Novels of the 1860s," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, no. 1 (2001): 1–19; Emily C. Friedman, *Reading Smell in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Hsuan L. Hsu, *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics* (New York: NYU Press, 2020); Daniela Babilon, *The Power of Smell in American Literature: Odor, Affect, and Social Inequality* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 2017); Christopher Looby, "The Roots of the Orchis, the Iuli of Chestnuts: The Odor of Male Solitude," in *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism*, ed. Paula Bennett and Vernon Rosario (New York: Routledge, 2020), 163–88.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille: l'odorat et l'imaginaire social, XVIIe-XIXe siècles* [The foul and the fragrant: Odor and the French social imagination] (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> David Howes, *The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies*, Centre for Sensory Studies, August 2013, [www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/](http://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/); Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, eds., *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Hsu, *The Smell of Risk*, 19.

## 2. COMPARING THE UNDEFINABLE

The study of comparative literature, traditionally more concerned with comparison as a somewhat transparent practice of reading, has undergone major theoretical and reflexive shifts since the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> It has become much more reflexive, problematizing the traditional model of comparison, namely the national-lingual one. It began questioning the actual ability and possibility of comparing at all, especially outside of Europe and the English-speaking world,<sup>8</sup> and has been striving to widen massively the concept of comparison toward various mediums, objects, and practices, far transgressing the traditional limits of the discipline.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, several scholars have brought forward theories regarding the possibility (or impossibility) of comparing up to the point of incomparability.<sup>10</sup> Following a parallel path, thinking of comparison with the sense of smell—a sense and phenomenon that are traditionally impossible to define clearly—poses a similar, but even more perplexing, problem: How can one compare what one cannot define? Put differently: which comparative method can the sense of smell, as a metaphor and as a conceptual structure, offer us? In the following paragraphs I will examine this question, partly following the thorough discussion of comparisons and comparativity in David Damrosch's *Comparing the Literatures*, alongside the conceptual history of smell.

A comparison, in Marcel Detienne's words, quoted in *Comparing the Literatures*, should make notions cloudy, fractured, disintegrated, and therefore objects for innovative and profound study.<sup>11</sup> But what if the material we work with and wish to compare is *literally* air or clouds, fractured and disintegrated, diffused and volatile in its essence? In a way, when comparing smell, it is as if the process of comparison has been already occurring before it even began, as just for stabilizing and stating of the object for comparison one must search for similarities and differences and experience ambiguousness and recurring questions of terms. It brings to mind the insight articulated by Ming Xie later in Damrosch's book, that of using comparativity instead of comparison. It asks to stress the ongoing process of comparison, the making of "the activity of comparing and the thinking about how to (not) compare," in Xie's words, and not necessarily, or at all, the outcomes of comparison.<sup>12</sup> The fracturing and cloudiness of notions thanks to comparison and the ongoing process of comparativity achieve new levels of extremity when thinking of smell and its volatile, ambiguous nature.

Smell, from the outset of the Western-canonized thought, has been defined by being indefinable, fleeting, volatile, transient, and subjective, and thus rejected from cognitive, epistemic, and aesthetic frameworks. From Plato on, philosophers have marked smell as impossible to classify, to verbalize, to define clearly. Some of Plato's, Aristotle's, and Kant's assertions will be helpful in illustrating the philosophers' perplexity regarding smell. "The faculty of smell," Plato writes in *Timaeus*, "does not admit of differences of kind; for all smells are of a half formed nature, and no element is so proportioned as to have any smell [...] smells always proceed from bodies that are

<sup>7</sup> David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 1–12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous claim for the death of comparative literature as a discipline could also be considered as a possible widening of the discipline, a widening that concludes in a complete metamorphosis.

<sup>10</sup> Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 305–12; one might refer here also to translation studies' interest in the untranslatable, expressed, among others, in Emily Apter's and Barbara Cassin's scholarly works.

<sup>11</sup> Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 309–10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

damp, or putrefying, or liquefying, or evaporating, and are perceptible only in the intermediate state.”<sup>13</sup> Aristotle continues in a similar fashion, stating in the beginning of his (very short) contemplation on smell in *De Anima*: “Smell and its object are much less easy to determine [...]; the distinguishing characteristic of the object of smell is less obvious than those of sound or color. The ground of this is that our power of smell is less discriminating.”<sup>14</sup> And at last, Immanuel Kant’s marginal note in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*: “Smell does not allow itself to be described, but only compared through similarity with another sense.”<sup>15</sup>

Plato, Aristotle, and Kant make their position very clear, especially as they all praise other senses—mainly sight and hearing—for allowing humans the abilities of inquiring of nature and the universe, endowing us with the conceptions of time, number, and philosophy as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, smell here is impossible to define clearly, vague and fleeting—and yet, it does have some valuable qualities: it allows us to follow matter in its intermediate states, it gives one the ability to perceive the sphere of transformation and of becoming, it demands acts of comparison and extensive conceptual work.

Thus, investigating smell offers us the opportunity, or even forces us, to pay attention to the process of becoming of the object. If we translate this structure into comparative literature, with Plato and Aristotle we end up with a never-ending comparativity which doesn’t even demand an other—as it finds and echoes the others, the multiple alterities, in itself. Indeed, Kant offers us smell as an essentially comparative sense that demands others even for the basic objective of being described. Taken together, these two comparative models lead to a multiplicity of comparativity, in the object itself and in its encounter with the multiple, fundamental others.

Taking into consideration very briefly other important figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is worth remembering Friedrich Hegel’s notes toward a “theoretical smelling” that could bind together the spiritual and the practical<sup>17</sup> and Friedrich Nietzsche’s fascination with the sense of smell, expressed, for example, in his *Twilight of the Idols*, where he denounced philosophy’s disregard of the senses and the body and called us to philosophize with the nose, “our most delicate instrument.”<sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud correlated the inception of civilization with the repression of the sense of smell and regarded it as the archetype of repression in general.<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, in his late works, defined his own critical method as scent-tracking, which allowed him to follow the trace of the other, which stood also for the trace of the animal.<sup>20</sup> These brief comments do serve as representative examples for the unique position smell has acquired over

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 32.

<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Hicks, ed., *Aristotle De Anima* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 91.

<sup>15</sup> Robert B. Loudon, trans. and ed., *Kant: Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 51.

<sup>16</sup> This can be viewed clearly in Plato’s *Timaeus* as in Aristotle’s *De Anima*. Kant makes it very clear, in the questions section of the “Anthropology,” that the first sense one can easily dismiss, if needed, is the sense of smell.

<sup>17</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 730.

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner: The Twilight of the Idols: Nietzsche contra Wagner*, trans. Thomas Common (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 116.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fleiss, quoted by Jacques Derrida, “Before the Law,” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 2017), 193.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008): 55.

the years as a concept; at once degraded and designated, an ancient remnant and a promising futuristic tool, and always stubbornly defying clear definitions.<sup>21</sup>

Smell, therefore, can be used as a method and a metaphor for a complex comparative work—one that is acutely needed in order to make sense of volatile materialities and ambiguous concepts. Such work is also perpetual, as the sense itself—understood here both as meaning and sensibility—is always fleeting, volatile, transient, ever-changing: resistant to one stable definition.

Addressing more practically smell's demand for comparativity and its potential outcomes would first call, I argue, for a comparison of the descriptions of odors and olfaction in a text, as well as the crucial points in it in which the phenomenology of smell comes into play. This phenomenology, which will be defined in the next section as not only inherently comparative, instable, and volatile, but also atmospheric,<sup>22</sup> brings up the question of the connection/rupture between literature and life, between the lingual and the sensory, as will be explained in the following paragraphs. A further take of this comparison would suggest an ongoing, inherent comparativity and contamination between different texts within a literature, as well as between different literatures, languages, and cultures. This method, I argue, following the attributes of smell, exposes the blind spots of the text, its moments of failure and rupture between the lingual and the sensory, both as possible air pockets in each text and as potential joints for weaving threads between texts, literatures, and languages.

### 3. MATERIAL-AERIAL READINGS: LIFE, LITERATURE, ATMOSPHERE

After addressing a few possible connections between smell and comparative literature and the insights these connections might evoke, I would like to turn to another intriguing question raised by Damrosch in *Comparing the Literatures*, a question that has been bothering thinkers and readers for many years and that could achieve a fresh articulation thanks to the sense of smell: Can one compare literature and life, and if so, how?<sup>23</sup> This is not merely a question of method or of technicalities, but points at the essential issue of the possible connection, or rupture, between literature and life.

In the past century, various theoretical approaches have attempted to tackle this problem in different ways. With Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht they can be roughly categorized in two binary approaches. The first, identified mainly with Deconstruction, would favor completely abstaining from offering any kind of connection with reality or the Real outside the text, claiming its own totality and realness.<sup>24</sup> The second, identified mainly with cultural studies, would claim a necessary representational relationship between the text and the outside world.<sup>25</sup> These contradictory approaches have urged the need of a “third position,” as Gumbrecht defines it,<sup>26</sup> and have

<sup>21</sup> These references demand much broader and more elaborated readings, which exceed the scope of the current essay. See Tal Yehezkel, “Traces of Smell: On a Theory and Poetics of Volatility” (master’s thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2020), 8–54.

<sup>22</sup> Within the humble scope of this essay, I only refer to certain attributes of smell—its atmospheric, volatile, fleeting, and transitory nature. Nevertheless, smell stands for a much richer phenomenology, which I strive to articulate in my broader PhD research.

<sup>23</sup> Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 303–04.

<sup>24</sup> An approach most identified with Jacques Derrida’s famous statement, “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” [There’s no(thing) outside the text].

<sup>25</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Stimmungen lesen: Über eine verdeckte Wirklichkeit der Literatur* [Atmosphere, mood, Stimmung: On a hidden potential of literature] (Munich: Hanser, 2011), 1–3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



been the motivation not only behind his own “Reading for Stimmung” but of a range of reading methods and theories, among them the various affect, sensory, and object-oriented theories.<sup>27</sup>

This theoretical gap, defined by the need to find another way to read and theorize, as well as to tackle the recurring problem of representation, meets the contemporary demand to address the environment, as climate change and climate crises are knocking on every disciplinary door. In this context, the present growing interest in air, atmosphere, and air-conditioning in various fields of study can be understood.<sup>28</sup> This interest has even achieved the degree of an “atmospheric turn,” claims Hsuan L. Hsu.<sup>29</sup> The turn refers to the numerous works in the humanities and in adjacent fields dealing with air and atmosphere, such as Peter Sloterdijk’s *Spheres* trilogy,<sup>30</sup> Ben Anderson’s “Affective Atmospheres,”<sup>31</sup> Derek P. McCormack’s *Atmospheric Things*,<sup>32</sup> and Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos’s *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere*.<sup>33</sup> This turn, as mentioned, is both a symptom of a scholarly community looking for new, different ways of reading and theorizing and an attempt to address the acute calling of our time, that of thinking with and for the environment.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* could be regarded as part of this turn, even if it doesn’t fully meet its requirements.<sup>34</sup> Gumbrecht writes in favor of the German *Stimmung*—the mood and atmosphere of reading and of literature. He forms a reading method that asks for “presence” instead of representation, a vitality of literature. The German *Stimmung* is related to voice (*Stimme*) and hearing, to the tuning of musical instruments, and has its own rich history within German culture.<sup>35</sup> Gumbrecht chooses to connect it to the event of reading a poem or prose and the auditory qualities that allow the past (the text) to realize itself in the present (the act of reading).<sup>36</sup>

Following, but also expanding Gumbrecht’s notion, I suggest another suitable sense to detect atmospheres, those of the text and those of life, that brings Gumbrecht’s attempt closer to the center of the “atmospheric turn”: the sense of smell. Smell might allow us to detect the actual *atmos* (vapor in Greek) that surrounds us and is present in our sphere. Smell could also bring back another important aspect of atmosphere that does not appear in the auditory metaphor of *Stimmung*—the fact that atmospheres do not only surround us but also actually penetrate our beings, through tiny particles, some of them as smell molecules that run through our noses, even in this very moment.

<sup>27</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> I would like to thank Eyal Bassan for introducing me to the realm of atmosphere and mention his new book, *Gnessin Style* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2021), which in its last chapter deals beautifully with notions of atmosphere and mood. Another articulation of these notions could be found in his forthcoming paper about the distribution of air in COVID-19 times.

<sup>29</sup> Hsu, *The Smell of Risk*, 7–12.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext I, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmosphere,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no. 2 (2009): 77–81.

<sup>32</sup> Derek P. McCormack, *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> The following widening of Gumbrecht’s notion, with the help of smell, could be considered as an attempt to bring Gumbrecht’s work to meet the requirements of the current turn, especially in terms of eco-thinking.

<sup>35</sup> Gumbrecht knowingly chooses not to work with the Heideggerian notion of *Stimmung*, although he does mention it briefly in his introduction.

<sup>36</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, 13.

A smell-atmospheric-reading could bring into presence various material qualities, usually neglected and degraded, of the matter that encircles us. This kind of reading also wishes to suggest the community of readers as a community of breathers<sup>37</sup>—breathing both physical and literary atmospheres. This reading-breathing might give way to fresh perspectives—if I may use a term from a rival sense—on life, literature, and the possibility to compare them. I will put these theoretical hypotheses to the test through the analysis of a study case from the modern Israeli national canon, Avraham B. Yehoshua’s “Mul ha-ye’arot” (Facing the Forests).

#### 4. AIRING THE ISRAELI CANON: AVRAHAM B. YEHOSHUA’S “MUL HA-YE’AROT”

With this double tool in hand, the sense of smell—both an unstable signifier, impossible to define and in constant need of comparison, and a sensitive instrument (“our most delicate instrument,”<sup>38</sup> according to Nietzsche)—to detect atmospheres, a reading is in order. I will apply this marginal tool on the strong, stable canon of modern Israeli national literature and one of its most dominant figures: Avraham B. Yehoshua.<sup>39</sup>

Scholars have long considered Yehoshua and the specific short story that will be dealt with here, “Mul ha-ye’arot” (Facing the Forests),<sup>40</sup> respectively, as one of the most canonized figures and stories of the modern Israeli national literature, especially with respect to its perception of the Palestinian other (together with Amos Oz’s “Navadim ve-tzefa” (Nomad and Viper) and *Mikha’el sheli*, (My Michael)).<sup>41</sup> Yehoshua’s short story, published in 1968, quickly gained popularity and power—and just as much negative critique. While early critics preferred to ignore the political aspects of the story relating instead to the psychological and generational issues it raises, denouncing its political value, others chose to criticize the allegedly poor connection between

<sup>37</sup> I owe this formulation to Hsuan. L. Hsu, who refers to the visitors of olfactory art exhibitions, not only as viewers or visitors, but also as breathers.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *Case of Wagner*, 116.

<sup>39</sup> In the current essay I will put to practice only the first type of comparison—that of comparing odors, olfaction, and the phenomenology of smell inside one text (in this specific case, it will be compared to other senses as well). This will serve as an example for the kind of work one might do with the sense of smell in literature. Nevertheless, in my broader project I use this tool to think of different texts within a literature and also of different literatures—for example, Orly Castel-Bloom’s “Ummi Fi Shurl,” which I compare to Avraham B. Yehoshua’s story, to be dealt with in the following sections of the essay. The faint smell of the kerosene in Yehoshua as well as the stench of the burnt forest is compared to Castel-Bloom’s “cosmic proportioned stench” diffused out of an old Mizrahi woman, which brings the Arabic language, that is completely silent in Yehoshua’s text, into presence (still in Hebrew letters, though). These moments are of course marks of the repressed but are also key moments of the breakage between what can be told and what is sensed, between what is literally present in the story and what encircles it. See Orly Castel-Bloom, “Ummi Fi Shurl” [My mother is at work] in *Sipurim Bilti Retsoniyim* [Involuntary stories] (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> Avraham B. Yehoshua, “Mul ha-ye’arot” [Facing the forests], in *Mul ha-ye’arot* (Tel Aviv: Haqibutz Hameuchad, 1968), 9–55.

<sup>41</sup> Yochai Oppenheimer, *Me’ever la-gader: Yitzug ha-aravim ba-siporet ha-ivrit ve-ha’arvit 1906–2005* [Barriers: The representation of the Arab in Hebrew and Israeli fiction, 1906–2005] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008), 215; Gilad Morag, “Ohavim veyorim: Pnei ha’aravi bare’i hasifrut” [Love, shoot: Facing the Arab in literature], *Moznayim* 61, no. 5/6 (1987): 15; Hannan Hever, “Minority Discourse of a National Majority: Israeli Fiction of the Early Sixties,” trans. Orin D. Gensler, *Prooftexts* 1, no. 10 (1990): 131.

the psychological and the political dimensions in the story.<sup>42</sup> Some scholars have even blamed Yehoshua for creating an allegedly “forced political allegory.”<sup>43</sup>

Confronting but also thinking with this critique, the following reading of the senses and especially the sense of smell in Yehoshua’s story will propose a different way, “a third position,” to quote Gumbrecht’s approach, toward understanding the story’s power over readers and scholars for more than fifty years, toward thinking anew its insights regarding the actual and the metaphorical atmospheres of Israel/Palestine, and toward formulating new methods of approaching this specific canon, and perhaps even canons in general.



Yehoshua’s “Mul ha-ye’arot” tells of an eternal student, unable to finish his papers, convinced by his friends to start a job as a forest scout (a firewatcher), hoping that the solitude of the forests will motivate his writing. The story is about him—but underneath the forest lies another story, that of “the mute Arab,” as Yehoshua calls him, a native Palestinian and his daughter, the student’s only companions in the deserted stone house, and their destroyed village that is literally hidden under the forest. Scholars have commented on the “forced allegory”<sup>44</sup> presented here, which is almost too verbal to handle: the fact that the Palestinian village (story) is literally hidden under the Israeli, Zionist, forest (new narrative), the presence of a mute Palestinian (the silencing of the Palestinian narrative), and the Israeli student who is at once interested in the Palestinian hidden village but who also refuses to take responsibility for his part in the violent action of its revelation: the fire, set by arson.

A comparative reading of the senses in “Mul ha-ye’arot” might help the readers to think anew, to “air” the canonical, symbolic effort presented in the story, without ignoring its political value. The forest scout, the student, sits in the best viewpoint of the area, watching over the entire forest, but the forest and the view, in this case, are more concealing than revealing. The student and his father try to engage in conversation with the Palestinian, but as the Palestinian’s tongue is cut, that doesn’t help them much. The student tries to understand, talk, think, write—but none of these actions succeed.<sup>45</sup> His research and attempts do not become explicit, and when they do it is in complicity with the violent act of the arson, i.e., in a destructive manner.

An atmospheric-smell approach might help us evade this destructive binary opposition. In fact, both the story itself and the act of reading are surrounded and penetrated by several atmospheres: physical, psychological, metaphorical, and conceptual ones. In the story, they are

<sup>42</sup> Gershon Shaked, “Mul ha-ye’arot” [Facing the forests], *Keshet* 39, no. 3 (1968): 76–85; Mordekhai Shalev, “Ha-aravim Ke-pitron sifrutu” [The Arabs as a literary solution], in *Mabatin mitstalvim: ‘iyunim bi-yetsirat A.B. Yehoshua’* [Intersecting perspectives: Essays on A.B. Yehoshua’s oeuvre], ed. Amir Benbaji, et al. (1974; Reprint, Tel Aviv: Hotsa’at ha-Ḳibuts ha-me’uḥad, 2010), 54–70; Menakhem Perry, “The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict as a Metaphor in Recent Israeli Fiction,” *Poetics Today* 4, no. 7 (1986): 603–19. Quoted in Yochai Oppenheimer, *Me’ever la-gader*, 200.

<sup>43</sup> B. Y. Mikhali, *Alegoryah kfuyah be-mul ha-ye’arot* [A forced allegory in facing the forests], *Moznayim* 46 (1978): 385, 393.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Avidov Lipsker-Albeck claims this is the starting point of most of Yehoshua’s early stories, his writing motive: the impossibility of writing, the despair of the attempts to write. In Avidov Lipsker-Albeck, “Alef bet Yehoshua—Retrospektiva: Mi-metafizika shel ro’a le-etiqā shel matsavim” [A.B. Yehoshua—A retrospective: From the metaphysics of evil to the ethics of situations], in *Mi-kan: ketav-‘et le-heker ha-sifrut ha-‘Ivrit*, no. 14 (2014): 317–19.



presented in part as odors: the fragrant books the student receives from his fellow researchers on the Crusades;<sup>46</sup> the faint smell of the kerosene that accompanies the continuous desire for, and fear of, a potential fire;<sup>47</sup> the old telephone wire, his only (unstable) connection to the outside world, which reeks of mold;<sup>48</sup> the young Palestinian girl's "woman's smell";<sup>49</sup> and the alienating "foreign smell" that the Palestinian and his daughter sense as the student comes near them.<sup>50</sup>

The volatile and transformative nature of airborne molecules, along with the unstable nature of smell as a concept and as a signifier, suggest that these atmospheric clues indeed point to a material, human, and more than human environment. However, it is an unstable, not completely clear environment, in constant transformation and movement. As the story goes on, seducing the reader to try to decipher the secretive plot, the Palestinian's actions, and the characters' perplexing nature, faint smells act as clues to these secrets. A clear (in its vagueness) case for these clues appears when the student finds small tins filled with kerosene hidden by the Palestinian. At this point, Yehoshua writes, "His reflection floats back at him together with a faint smell."<sup>51</sup> It is what the Palestinian cannot tell, what the Israeli cannot see or hear, and doesn't reveal, until the very end of the story. It is this faint smell, the same kerosene smell that will finally reveal the cause of the catastrophic fire—arson—and the open secrets of the story: the Palestinian's responsibility for the arson, the complicity of the Israeli firewatcher, and the presence of the hidden Palestinian village that encircles the story. These material atmospheric particles act as clues, in the story and for its interpretation, but, when deciphered, they become destructive, forced, "too obvious," and bring the story to its catastrophic and despairing end.

If we, on the contrary, refer to these clues as what they are—odors, smells, smell-atmospheres—we might succeed in avoiding such destructive outcomes. These traces, too quickly and too easily turned into determinative conclusions, function at the level of both the (canonical) story and (canonical) interpretations. In the story, it is the actual smell that too quickly, in the morning after the fire, turns the implicit explicit and leads the investigators straight to the Palestinian, blaming him for starting the fire, thus bringing the story to its inevitable, stereotypical, dead end:

It has been an arson. Yes, arson. The smell of morning dew comes mingled with the smell of kerosene. [...] The investigation is launched at once. [...] At three o'clock he [the student] breaks in their hands, is prepared to suggest the Arab as a possible clue. This, of course, is what they have been waiting for. They have suspected the Arab all along.<sup>52</sup>

At the level of interpretation, it is the all-too-quick patching of Yehoshua's symbolic effort to the political reality—both by researchers-investigators and by Yehoshua himself—the all-too-easy link of the literary signifier and the alleged signified (the Israeli/Palestinian conflict) in the world, that made this story a justified target for critics.

Nevertheless, if one chooses to give in to the nature of these atmospheric, odorant clues or traces, instead of rushing into forcing them to become concrete (visual) evidence, one might

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<sup>46</sup> Avraham B. Yehoshua, "Mul ha-ye'arot," 21.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

encounter the complex entanglement of the literary work as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict offered in this story, along with their possible intersections. This entanglement doesn't offer any easy answers, but it does offer a way or a method to encounter the literary as well as the political problem in all its complexity, in all its ambiguity, in its volatile and confusing nature. Working both with Yehoshua's story and with its critique, thinking on the problematization of the link/rupture it presents between literature and life, enables us to detect a new potential link between the actual, in this case also political, atmospheres and the literary, metaphoric ones. This "radical link" finds its inspiration in the unstable nature of smell: unstable as a physical phenomenon, as a theoretical concept, and as a linguistic signifier.

The atmospheres in "Mul ha-ye'arot" also follow a certain structure of the return of the repressed, as smell is the object of the first repression, and serves as the archetypal model of repression according to Sigmund Freud.<sup>53</sup> Yehoshua himself testified in one of his latest interviews regarding "Mul ha-ye'arot" that "[the] problem in the story is the problem of repression."<sup>54</sup> At first glance, it is the return of the animalistic, even violent nature of the human that comes to the fore. In fact, smell has a strong affinity with the binary opposition of attraction/repulsion, which appears as one of smell's most distinct characteristics in the history of ideas,<sup>55</sup> as well as in contemporary empiric research.<sup>56</sup> The tension between attraction and repulsion that smell brings into play is present in Yehoshua's story as an expression of political-ethnic belonging and alienation, as a sign of sexual attraction and repulsion, and as an attraction/repulsion to the destructive powers of the fire. The smell of the kerosene is repeatedly followed by inner monologues that express a desire toward the coming fire. "How wonderful," the student cries when he smells the kerosene from the tins.<sup>57</sup> Again, when he is walking with the Palestinian in the forest, he senses a desire to "dip his hands in fire."<sup>58</sup> In the beginning, the Palestinian and his daughter immediately sense the student's presence as they "sniff his alien being and fall silent."<sup>59</sup> Later on in the story, the Palestinian child is described by the student as "her limbs have ripened, her filth become a woman's smell."<sup>60</sup> It is in these descriptions and the like that the relationship between the student and the Palestinian family is both defined and modified. The change in the descriptions of smell stands also for a change in the protagonist's affinity to the Palestinian and his daughter. He suddenly acknowledges their presence as subjects, even disturbed ones, and repulsion and alienation turn to attraction and familiarity. The student suddenly is aware of "how she has grown up"<sup>61</sup> and that the Palestinian father is acting strangely. Together with the change of the girl's scent, she is also taking the role of the firewatcher of her own free will, without the need to chain her to the chair, as her father used to do before.<sup>62</sup> This change of roles allows the student to "stay

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Freud to Fleiss, quoted in Derrida, "Before the Law," 193.

<sup>54</sup> Anat Sharon Bleis and Shiri Lev Ari, "Mul ha-ye'arot me'et A. B. Yehoshua" [A. B. Yehoshua's facing the forests], *Shiv'im Shana Shiv'im Sfarim* (Jerusalem: Kan, 2018), <https://www.kan.org.il/podcast/item.aspx?pid=10383>.

<sup>55</sup> See Yehezkel, "Traces of Smell," 12–19 (regarding Plato's and Aristotle's remarks on smell) and 39–44 (regarding Freud's remarks on the human sense of smell); A. S. Barwich, *Smellosophy: What the Nose Tells the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020): 13–54.

<sup>56</sup> Barwich, *Smellosophy*, 119–46.

<sup>57</sup> Yehoshua, "Mul ha-ye'arot," 39.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

among the trees, not facing them,<sup>63</sup> and later on “they sit there, the three of them like a family, in the room on the second floor.”<sup>64</sup> When the fire is raging the student doesn’t care much for his belongings or books, but instead he takes the girl to a safe haven, and when her father is arrested for committing the arson, the student demands that the authorities take care of her,<sup>65</sup> a demand that ends in a fight between the firewatcher and his supervisor.<sup>66</sup>

However, smell, in the reading proposed here, is not only an expression of repressed instincts of attraction and repulsion, of the human animalistic nature. It is also a sign for what is not yet completely deciphered in perception and in consciousness, in the phenomenon of repression and in its possible returns. It is a sign of what remains ambiguous in the relationship between the human and its surroundings, its human and more-than-human environment. The odors that are emanated in the story act each in their turn as entanglements of meanings, of material and conceptual histories, and as various potential links between life and literature, refusing to reveal themselves completely. These scent-clues could become the object of investigation, and therefore turn into hard evidence pointing at possible answers. However, reading Yehoshua’s story, as well as the conceptual history of smell and its comparative method, suggest that the story and its traces should be read differently: as possible entanglements for further comparison, contemplation, and dwelling, as pointing at a problem but not at an answer, calling us for more pierced, aired, not completely determined insights. This undecipherability, which is a core value of smell, allows for the reading to perform itself but still maintain levels of freedom.

Which kind of research was the student planning to write? What would be the form of a research that is “not exactly scientific . . . rather, humane . . .” as Yehoshua puts it?<sup>67</sup> One that refuses to follow the current research, which in Yehoshua’s story is that of the policemen, as throughout the investigation “a veritable research is being compiled before his eyes,”<sup>68</sup> the only research that is actually being written in the story. We remain with these open questions, which call for the forming of new methods and readings, a calling that this essay attempts to follow.

Nevertheless, these linguistic and literary holes are not merely air pockets waiting to be filled; they also serve as possible joints. In the current story, the smell of the kerosene and of the “alien beings” not only points at the destructive end of the story. If we suspend the final outcome, as smell often asks us to do, these odors actually point to a connection in its moments of becoming—the radical link that is forming between the student and the Palestinian family. This link, that is expressed gradually through the odors that constitute the atmosphere of the story, is one of a co-resistance more than co-existence, as the student—a firewatcher—repeatedly ignores the signs of a coming arson, thus putting their existence at risk and at the same time giving way to their acts of resistance. The story doesn’t clearly indicate the nature of this presumably dangerous rapport, which is certainly not fully realized in it, but rather hints toward it, leaving signs and traces of its potential present/future existence. Smell here thus asks us to go back both in space and in time, follow the undecipherable traces and clues it leaves, and offer these traces a

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>66</sup> These readings also correspond with various interpretations of the national Israeli literary canon that focus on the tension between the attraction to and repulsion from the other. See, for example, Oppenheimer, *Me’ever la-gader*, 196–204, 251–55.

<sup>67</sup> Avraham B. Yehoshua, “Mul ha-ye’arot,” 42.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 53.

more suitable and subtle treatment than that of an investigation. Following this path, the return of the repressed here is not of animalistic instincts but rather of forgotten affinities, of “staying among” and not “facing.”<sup>69</sup> The alleged complicity could then be read as a radical cooperation and the all-too-quick turning of the story into a catastrophe that demands investigation, of sensibility into evidence,<sup>70</sup> is therefore suspended and reversed, offering the story’s sensory traces as alternative joints, both political and literary ones.



In this essay, I aspire to articulate a preliminary outline for an airy reading of literature, inspired by the sense of smell. This outline is mainly based on two grounds. The first is the comparative method suggested here, deriving from the conceptual and lingual problems of defining and verbalizing smell. The second is the unique materiality of smell and its atmospheric nature; one that is microscopic, fleeting, volatile, and dispersed, but at the same time creates an aerial sphere that encircles us and is most present. The unstable signifier of smell thus enables the reading to follow these fleeting and volatile attributes, without forcing them into false categories and definitions.

Putting this marginalized, neglected sense and phenomenon into use as a reading tool and as a reading object suggests a possible piercing and airing of the literary canon. Performing this reading on one of the most renowned works of the Israeli-Hebrew canon demonstrates a few of the possible potentialities of a smell reading: a reading of material clues and traces, very present but not fully defined, that insists on staying devoted to their ambiguous nature; a piercing and airing of symbolic and allegorical efforts—both within the original text and in the body of interpretation that accompanies it; and finally, pointing, in the perplexing manner of smell, toward sites of political and literary entanglements, offering them as potential, previously unnoticed, joints. A

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>70</sup> I refer here to a passage at the end of the story, just a moment before the protagonist breaks in the investigation and offers “the Arab as a possible clue,” in which Yehoshua writes, “He removes his glasses and his senses go numb. He starts contradicting himself.” And only a few lines before, the student complains that the investigators ask him, “What did he see, what did he hear, what did he do. It’s insulting, this insistence upon the tangible—as though that were the main point, as though there weren’t some idea involved here” (Yehoshua, “Mul ha-ye’arot,” 53). Reading this passage from the standpoint of smell indicates that the problem is not the “insistence upon the tangible,” but rather the insistence upon the wrong tangibility—that is, on the evidential tangibility, rather than the volatile, transient, and yet intense tangibility of smell, that is most present in the story.