GILA RAMRAS-RAUCH

THE ARAB IN ISRAELI LITERATURE

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bloomington and Indianapolis

I.B.TAURIS & CO LTD
London

disgust with language itself. Wisdom, folly, and the silences between them, all are to no avail. A similar oscillation overtakes the Israeli soldier who is thrown into the intimacy of life in the Arab village—and he faces the Arabs, now as co-inhabitants of the land, now as the enemy. At the end of the novel, the Israeli knows that in this round of fighting, on this particular hill, he is the victor, and he extends his feeling to the entire land his eyes see. Yet although the battle is over, the haunting question remains: But is the war over? Yizhar has his protagonist ask it in 1948; Yizhar himself asks it in 1958; it is a question that persists into the present, as we know all too well.

Throughout Yizhar's work, war mars the reality which he depicts through the romantic innocence of his characters. His young protagonists come to early maturity through war. The stream of consciousness is no longer caught up in the solipsistic self. The sight of burned bodies, the awareness of fate's mutability, the experience of pain and the inflicting of pain, hate and compassion, alienation and belonging—all combine in an interiority that experiences the extremes of the human situation.

In its classic form, the epic novel has a cumulative effect, as the reader is made more and more familiar with characters, events, and their details. Background and foreground are brought together, as the main characters are at center stage. Yet Yizhar does not perceive the battle over this one hill as representing the entire war of 1948—and, indeed, the incompleteness of his account (when compared to the classic epic novel) is a mirror for the radical incompleteness of all human acts, purposes, and achievements. It is as though the self-imposed limits of his narrative technique are deliberately chosen to reflect the limits of all that we do.

Yizhar's technique creates an immediacy which is not typical of the war novel, where the omniscient narrator engulfs the totality. *Ziklag*'s concluding interior monologue presents a voice that is itself divided by inconsistencies and contradictions, and this makes perfect sense since it is the stream of consciousness of someone immersed in actual combat:

> It's sickening to kill you! Why did you come here! Why are you stuck here, making killing you the only way to get rid of you, God damn you. . . . What a despicable road one has to go in order to win. It's terrible to be this way. Shut up, it's not terrible. . . . (p. 1139)

And the short sentences before the concluding paragraph:

> The hill is ours, the fields, the open spaces, the land. Have we finished? (p. 1143)

As we saw, the question is raised not only because the conflict cannot be conclusively resolved, but also because the individual soldier cannot know the course of the entire war. In the classic epic, one does know; but not here, because there is no link between foreground and background. And as a result, the limited perspective of the individual fighter lacks the overall sense of justification that is needed.

Yizhar's men, therefore, are products not only of existential uncertainty; they are as much the products of his narrative technique. They are enmeshed not only in the futility of action per se, but also in the stream of consciousness from which they emerge only fitfully. Yizhar's paradox (as we noted) is in his unique creation of the solipsistic protagonist who yearns for the open spaces, a protagonist whose objective uncertainty is the projection of his extreme inwardness.

Yizhar's latest work of fiction is his 1963 collection of four novellas, *Stories of the Plain*.[17] Two of these novellas, "The Heap of Dung" and "A Story That Did Not Begin," touch upon the subject of the Arab and Yizhar's younger days. "The Heap of Dung" is a first-person narrative of an event experienced in childhood, the selling of dung by Bedouin Arabs of the Negev to Jewish farmers. The dung is brought in on camels, and the weighing and bargaining are done in a ritualistic manner. The child/narrator is shocked by the deceit involved. When his older brother tells him that that is the way of the world, the young narrator says that it does not have to be this way. The brother replies that he doesn't know if it has to be this way or not, but this is how things are.

Although most commentators tend to see the moral emphasis here as characteristic of Yizhar, primarily in regard to the relations between Jews and Arabs, and although the Arab is interwoven into both settings, Yizhar associates him with the old world of his own childhood—a world that came to its end for him with his brother's death in a railroad accident in 1942, and the establishing of the State in 1948. For Yizhar, the Arab is associated with innocence—and moral indignation arises only in the reality of war.

"A Story That Did Not Begin" is Yizhar's epitaph for that early world, pointing ironically to silence and to the limitations of language vis-à-vis human experience. The first-person narrator addresses someone who is walking with him to a site familiar to the narrator from his childhood days. The account touches on the death of Yizhar's brother, as he and an Arab associate were riding a motorcycle over a railroad crossing, were struck by a passing train, and were killed instantly.

In one section entitled "The Silence of the Villages" (pp. 145–64), the narrator and his companion arrive at a hill with new carob trees. The hill is all that remains of what was once an Arab village, a village the narrator knew. Referring to the Arab rioting of the 1930s, he notes that the village was known as a "wasps' nest," a "ravens' nest," even an "eagle's nest":

> A "murderers' village" it was called in the newspapers in those days, without anyone trying too hard to know what it looked like or where it

> was, exactly. But it's always good when people have a place they can visualize, as a cave of violent men and a pit of vipers. It's hard to live in a world that has no such horrible places. And maybe it was even the place of the terrible Abu Jilda, once so well known for his deeds but now forgotten. Here he slept, or at least he passed by to instill fear, here he had a sip of coffee, murdered a bit, mounted his horse and disappeared. However that may be, this is what the place is today. (p. 147)

Does the narrator really question the reputation of the village as a haven of marauders? The same question was raised in connection with Hirbet Hizah.

Abu Jilda was well known in the 1930s as the head of one of the gangs that brought terror to the local Jewish population. There was a Hebrew jingle about him sung by children. Arab attacks on the Jewish population were heaviest in 1921. In 1929 there was the Hebron massacre, and the attacks began again in 1936, lasting to 1939. Although the narrator clearly states that a Jew could not go near the village in those days, he now adopts a rather light and condescending tone about the dangers of the village and Abu Jilda. The narrator admits that vicious crimes were committed against innocent people. "But are we the judges of the world, to judge of good and evil . . . ?" He says that he is "only a man who sees, a man in pain from seeing." And all that is left is a place that left its place, a story in past tense. He has not come to eulogize or to condemn, he says. Where in the world did it not happen? (pp. 149–50)

The narrator's first encounter with the village occurs when he is in a military unit that has taken the hill and is conducting a house-to-house search. There are corpses and there are people fleeing; a barn is set on fire; then the land is silent, back to its original state. To him it seems, however, that the earth in its depth does not forget—only men do.

The author has only sarcasm for any attempt to eradicate the past by giving new names to such places. The new names are more "cultured," and some are from the Bible. Modern agriculture yields richer crops, more "cultured" crops. Yet in his view a certain basic balance has been destroyed. He misses the innocence of those who lived then and were devoid of all self-consciousness. The senseless death of his brother and his Arab partner, the hill, the forgotten village—its cries and its silence mark their eulogy. Although the villages that were there are no longer, and new ones have sprung up in their place, the hill and the land are still there, even the deserted railroad tracks. The narrator says, "I drag with me the tale of my sermons, wherever I go" (p. 193).

Stories of the Plain is a parting collection, a farewell to the land that has changed, and to those in it who have changed even more, a farewell to the old pre-State Land of Israel under Ottoman and then British rule, a farewell to the Arab village and to the Bedouins the author knew as a child. It is an

ode to a way of life of which the Arab was an integral part. "A Story That Did Not Begin" is a summation of all the themes in Yizhar's work.

Yizhar as Political Essayist. Yizhar Smilansky has always been vocal in the Israeli political arena—not only during his six terms in the Knesset, but even now as a professor of Hebrew literature at Tel Aviv University. And his writing, political articles as well as fiction, has always created controversy. In addition to the storm of discussion in connection with the film *Hirbet Hizah*, there was also a massive outcry against his being awarded a number of literary prizes in the 1950s. He continues to voice his decisive political views in the press.

In his contribution to a 1985 symposium at Tel Aviv University on "The Israeli Situation and Hebrew Fiction of the Last Decade," Yizhar took an unpopular stand.[18] He challenged the notion of a definitive connection between literature and political reality. First, he challenged the sociocultural/historical emphasis in literary criticism. Then he went on to challenge the mimetic approach which sees literature as a reflection of political reality and as the expression of its era. Finally, he challenged the assumption underlying the symposium topic by arguing that the "Israeli Situation" in the last decade can be of no interest to literature. In his view, it is not the function of literature to represent reality—and he stated this as a principle governing literature of the past, present, or future. Since questions posed in historiography differ from those posed in literature (or in the study of it), there can be no necessary connection between them.

Moreover, the events that occurred in Israel during its few decades did not "make" literature. Rather, literature "used" these events—just as it will always find its "matter," and press it to its own needs. Even in "war literature," he argued, we do not have a reflection of the "war event"—which is why the historian cannot admonish the writer of fiction for not "placing the cannons in the right position," just as the political scientist has no right to say that the central figures in a work of fiction are not represented "as they were."

Since the historical events are but the raw materials of fiction, the writer is responsible only to the fictional world of his creation, Yizhar said. This is because literature goes beyond the present time, and so the writer's main concern must be the creative act. To interpret literature as a sociopolitical document is to drag it into the mire of journalism. Thus literature begins when it severs its dependence on reality, and even departs from it.

It is not at all ironic that Yizhar, the writer of fiction who has been most heavily attacked on political grounds, should renounce the connection between literature and politics. Clearly, Israeli literary critics in the 1980s have retained the tendency to evaluate works of literature for their political *effect*. The contention is that the abnormal situation in which Israelis have