Introduction

Amos Oz dubbed him “The most important writer in Israeli literature,” and A.B. Yehoshua concurred, referring to his crowning achievement, the mammoth-size novel, Days of Ziklag as “The most important book written since the foundation of the State of Israel.” Thus crowned by two of Israel’s most popular novelists as well as by every Israeli literary critic of note, S (milansky) Yizhar (1916-2006) enjoyed an unchallenged high status in Israeli writing throughout his almost seventy-year long literary career. He was and still is commonly regarded as both the founding father of Israeli literature and its chief master of prose fiction. However, this superlative assessment demands further exploration. For even the lesser of these two accolades—the author's position as the first master builder who laid the foundations of Israeli literature as a whole—has never been clearly explained or convincingly demonstrated.

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There are two mutually complementary supposed facts that are habitually cited to prove Yizhar's historical role as a literary founding father. The first is that he was the first modern Hebrew writer to be born and raised in Israel, in contrast to all his predecessors who had been born in the Diaspora, did not speak Hebrew as a mother tongue, and received at least a part of their formative education in non-Israeli educational institutions, whether traditional or modern. The implication is that Yizhar's unique position as a "native" allowed him to develop his extraordinary sensitivity to the Israeli landscape, and played an integral role in his approach to Hebrew as a literary language based on the spoken rather than traditional, written, idiom. It is also assumed that Yizhar's "native" childhood and adolescent experiences played a part in his choice to focus, perhaps more than any other writer, on the birth pangs of Israel both throughout the last decade of the pre-state period (his first extended short-story, "Ephraim Goes Back to Alfalfa" was published as early as 1938) and particularly during the War of Independence, which supplied background for the largest chunk of his fictional works.

The second supposed fact pertains to Yizhar's alleged role in the emergence of the so-called "literary generation" of the 1948 War, also known as "The Palmach Generation" in reference to the special commando unit which played a crucial military role during the first months of the 1948 War. The importance of the Palmach led to its name being adopted as an appellation for the entire 1948 generation as well as for the group of writers who became active and gained some public presence right before or during the Israeli War of Independence. S. Yizhar was located within this generational framework and associated with the above mentioned literary group, in spite of the fact that he is at least a half a decade older than the oldest among those regarded as representative members of the Palmach Generation, and had emerged as a distinct literary presence close to a full decade before the most precocious and prominent among them had gained recognition. The chronological gap seemed to strengthen his right to primogeniture, which was acknowledged by the members of the group who hailed him as their precursor and trailblazer.

However, on close examination both these proofs of historical primacy are revealed to be closer to myth than fact. S. Yizhar was indeed born in an agricultural settlement on the southern Israeli coastal plain to a family of pioneers, farmers and writers who had arrived in the country some twenty-five years before. His father, Ze'ev Smilansky (1873-1944), arrived in Palestine when only eighteen years old, and throughout a multi-dimensional career served as an agricultural worker, a teacher, and a writer. A self-taught scholar, he was the first professional statistician of the Zionist project in Palestine, as well as one of the founders of the Socialist but non-Marxist party Hapo'el Hatzair (which would eventually form part of Ben Gurion's centrist Labor Zionist party Mapai). He was also a regular contributor to its important weekly, Yizhar's uncle, David Smilansky (1875-1953), one of the founders of Tel Aviv, was a businessman and an occasional writer as well. His great-uncle, Moshe Smilansky (1874-1953), was a farmer and public figure representing the liberal, right-wing organization of the farmers of the established "old" settlements; a popular historian of the early days of the Zionist endeavor in Palestine, he was also a courageous propagandist advocating Jewish-Arab peaceful coexistence, and a widely read author of popular novels and short-stories set in Palestine, in which the romanticized figures of the Palestinian Arab and Bedouin were first introduced to modern Hebrew literature. Thus Yizhar, in spite of the fact that his family never achieved financial security and could not afford to give him anything beyond the bare essentials in his childhood, certainly belonged within the small, elect, "Mayflower" group of the Zionist founding fathers, and can indeed be regarded as the first Israeli-born writer to emerge from this specific group. Nonetheless, this hardly means that he is the first Palestinian "native" Hebrew writer. He had been preceded by about a dozen other "natives" who were sensitive to and knowledgeable about various aspects of life in Palestine with which he would never gain sufficient acquaintance to incorporate into his fictional portrayal of the land. Thus, for instance, the important novelists of Palestinian-Sephardic extraction, Yehuda Burla (born in Jerusalem, 1886) and Itsiksh Shami (born in Hebron, 1888), brought to Hebrew...
literature not only the colorful reality of their own community of origin, but also a thorough knowledge of the language and lifestyle of the Palestinian Arabs and a highly developed intuitive understanding of the psycho-social dynamics of the Palestinian Arab community. The novelist and short-story writer, Yaakov Khurgin (born in Jaffa, 1898), and the much younger novelist Yehoshua Bar-Yosef (born in Safad, 1912) wrote from a "native" Palestinian perspective that was as authentic as that of Yizhar, albeit of a different socio-cultural slant, having as background the "Old Yishuv" Palestinian-Ashkenazi contingent of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Tiberias and Safad rather than the Zionist pioneers originating from the Ukraine and Poland. Perhaps more importantly, Yizhar had also been preceded by Esther Raab (born in Petach Tikva, 1894), one of the founding mothers of Hebrew women's poetry, and herself the daughter of the pioneering farmers who in the 1870s had established the first agricultural Jewish settlement in the land. Her portrayal of the Palestinian landscape and the ambience of the Jewish agricultural settlement in a series of poems and short stories published throughout the 1920s (the poems were collected in 1930 in the brilliant volume Kismonim [Thistles]) is every bit as rich, evocative and informed by first-hand experience and genuine native sensibilities as would be its equivalent in the best stories of S. Yizhar, crafted nearly two decades later. Thus the myth of Yizhar being the first Hebrew Palestinian-native writer reflects not only deplorable ignorance, but also the arrogance and myopia of the Eastern European Ashkenazi Labor Zionist elite, who were unable to acknowledge the presence and significance of those who did not emerge from their midst. Yizhar, deserving recognition for many merits and achievements, does not deserve the accolade that pertained to his social "Mayflower"-Zionist background, rather than to the true history and chronology of Hebrew writing in Palestine.

His role as the precursor or founder of the so-called Palmach Generation has even less historical substance than his reputation as the first native-born "tzabar" in the annals of Hebrew writing. The concept of the "1948 Generation" in Hebrew literature and culture, if it is to have any relatively well-defined and fruitfully applicable histori-
None of these characteristics fit either the biography or literary work of S. Yizhar. Even if we discount the aforementioned chronological gap that separates him from almost all members of the Palmač Generation, we still have to take into account several distinct differences. First, ideologically and politically he was brought up in the heart of the anti-Marxist, utopian socialism of Hapo'el Ha'atzma'ut, and never had any emotional or intellectual affinity with communism in general and with that of Stalinist Russia in particular. Philosophically he was never influenced by the prophets of dialectical materialism, and was, more than anything else, a romantic informed by the Nietzschean vitalism he had absorbed through the teachings of the “Cosmic Zionism” propagated by A. D. Gordon, the guru of the Second Aliya, who believed that the Jewish historical identity had to be supplemented, if not altogether superseded, by the identity “normal” nations acquired through their contact with the “cosmos”, i.e., with the elements. Throughout his life Yizhar remained close to centrist Labor Zionist trends, and served for seventeen years (1949–1966) as a representative of Ben Gurion’s Mapai in the Israeli Knesset; this during the period in which the relationship between this party and those of the radical left, with which most of the members of the Palmač Generation were affiliated, was strained.

Second, his formative experiences only partly overlapped with those of the younger writers. Central to his consciousness were the pre-1936 Arab-Jewish clashes. He vividly remembered the Arab riots of May 1921, in which the writer Y.H. Brenner, sequestered in a house near Jaffa, was murdered. The 1929 riots, and particularly the fall of Hulda, the first Zionist agricultural settlement to be abandoned under the pressure of Arab attacks, were so central to his world view that he dedicated his first full-length novel, The Grove on the Hill, to the Hulda battle. The clash of Fascism and Communism in Europe as well as World War II were never as important to him as they were to the aforementioned younger writers. His visionary world was thoroughly Palestinian and intentionally of a limited scope. He was interested in botany, geology and music rather than in class struggle and world history. Although in his early youth he served as a teacher in some kibbutzim, and even described them in his very first novellas, he never entertained a particularly high opinion of the communal-egalitarian lifestyle. As a sworn individualist, he found it repugnant, something to flee from, if possible. He never frequented the tents of the Palmač, was not on the same spiritual wavelength as the mentors of the Palmač group, and had little if any appreciation for the Palmač celebrated lifestyle and slang (if he would intertwine some of these in the fabric of a few of his stories, it was usually in an ironic context). What is more, he did not take part in nor was he committed to paramilitary underground activities. Throughout the 1940s, he was rather a teacher and professional writer. He never published a word in any of the periodicals frequented by the members of the Palmač Generation, and never acknowledged the authority of A. Shlonsky. On the contrary, in search for a publication outlet for his first novellas, he turned to the semi-conservative monthly Gilyonot, whose editor, the erstwhile expressionist poet Y. Lamdan, was a bitter enemy of Shlonsky and his neo-symbolist group. Artistically, he had no use for the blatant realism of the representative members of the Palmač Generation, nor did he ever think highly of them as writers. His models were not the latter day developers of essentially nineteenth-century narrative modalities, whether American or Russian, but rather the early twentieth-century pioneers of Hebrew modernism, with U.N. Gnessin, the great initiator of both stream of consciousness and symbolist-“symphonic” narrative modalities in Hebrew literature, as his immediate inspiration. He was also greatly influenced by the chief practitioners of British and American stream of consciousness fiction, such as William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf.

In short, there is no reason to regard Yizhar as even belonging to the literary generation he supposedly founded. The fact that the War of Independence occupies so central place in his writings—from 1948 until the publication of Days of Ziklag in 1958, nearly a full decade, his work for adult readers dealt exclusively with that war in its various phases—does not in itself render him the contemporary of the young soldiers he portrays. A helpful comparison in this context is the poet Nathan Alterman, who dedicated the better part of his work...
throughout the 1950s to the war and its historical significance: this does not bridge the generational gap separating him from the youngsters who had shouldered the burden of fighting, the lad and the lass he eulogizes in his famous ballad “The Silver Tray”. Essentially, Yizhar was annexed to the Palmach Generation by literary-political strategists of this movement, who, under heavy critical attack for real and imaginary shortcomings, regarded his formidable prestige as an important asset. He himself consistently objected to this annexation—so much so that he rather unnecessarily developed less-than-convincing theoretical pseudo-formalist arguments refuting the very applicability of the concept of “generation” to art in general and to literature in particular. He maintained that only the individual artist and the specific art object represent an authentic artistic phenomenon, while historical generalizations do not correspond to any verifiable artistic reality. This rather crude rejection of any supra-individual aspects of artistic or literary development is completely alien to the views of sophisticated formalists such as V. Shklovsky, Y. Tiniyov, or B. Eichenbaum, and should be regarded as little more than Yizhar’s rather hopeless attempt to throw off his literary back the company of Shamir, Meged, et al. The fact that his theory is not sustainable, however, does not imply that Yizhar, malgre lui, should in fact be affiliated with this company.

Yizhar’s role as founding father is something far more subtle than his “nativity”, or his ties with a specific literary group. Rather it lies in the conjunction of certain narrative and ideational elements in his work that together form a fictional world which was felt to have encapsulated the basic rudiments of an Israeli condition or mindset. We shall attempt to isolate these elements, and analyze their essential “Israeli” qualities. However, before doing so it is important to note that Yizhar’s fictional world, at least the one he constructed through-
young man with vast, if spotty, erudition in matters pertaining to fauna, flora, geology, astronomy, music and archaeology; the fellah, a youngster who having grown up on a farm is constantly preoccupied by notions of farming, and possesses "good hands", a knack for dealing with dysfunctional machines, and an inbred understanding of tools and their uses.

It is only in his very late works, written and published in the 1990s after three decades of eschewing prose fiction, as well as his stories written for youngsters, such as those collected in *Six Summer Tales* (1950) and *Barefoot* (1959), that Yizhar transcends, to a certain extent, these narrow boundaries. However, it was this very aspect in his major works (all of which had been written before he was well into his forties), this unrelenting focus on a limited inventory of themes, characters and fictional situations, that rendered Yizhar the trailblazer and the cultural and literary pioneer that he was. For as monotonous as his narrative could be, the paucity of thematic and characterological innovation was not only compensated for by the overwhelming richness of descriptive detail, the symphonic stylistic orchestration of the author's distinctive Hebrew, and the intense emotional impact of the dangerous situations he portrayed, but also, and more importantly, that very paucity was felt to be the essence of a highly significant cultural and literary innovation. It was as if Yizhar had managed to identify the core of a new condition and obsessively attach himself to it. The few narrative components he worked with represented the rudiments of a new mindset that was seen as quintessentially “Israeli”. Yizhar's stories, with their meager thematic contents and oversized descriptive and linguistic apparatus seemed like the necessary and logical results of the author's uncompromising delving into the infrastructure of “Israeliness”. This targeted, pinpointed delving necessitated a certain shrinkage, as depth replaced width. The multifariousness of a literature that had encompassed the entire Jewish world, spread over four continents and a millennial history, had to be replaced, at least for a certain period, by a fervent homogeneity. To adjust the ear to catch the new musical register, a certain monotony had to be embraced.

First and foremost it was the all-encompassing monotony of open spaces. The emphasis was almost from the very beginning on wild, uninhabited or semi-inhabited spaces: a landscape of fields, wild patches, sands and desert reaches, is the usual arena in which the stories are set. This arena affords almost no room for the complex living entities of space as adapted to the vital and constant requirements of normal human existence. A few fragmentary descriptions of kibbutzim and collective villages appear in the early stories, but these serve only as a foil to the great openness of a wild world bereft of shelter and human order. The sheer linguistic and descriptive triumphantly successful grappling with the description of this wild world is a great, indeed, unique, artistic achievement not only of Yizhar but of modern Hebrew culture as a whole. For about a century and a half the so-called "New" Hebrew literature, triggered by the modernist revolution of the Enlightenment, had set as one of its chief cultural and artistic goals the reawakening of a sense of "place", of being in a concrete world, of directly negotiating existence with the elements and with nature (all of these had been very much alive in biblical times). It not only ascribed tremendous value to every form of information which would enhance the sense of space, encouraging the publication of popular books on geography, ecology, astronomy and biology, but also desired to develop the experiential reality of space through emotive and mimetic rendering. Every advance in this direction was celebrated as a victory. Thus Bialik dubbed S.Y. Abramovitch the founding father of Hebrew prose fiction in honor of his contribution toward placing Hebrew literature within a "concrete world". According to Bialik, Abramovitch lifted the curtain of biblical quotations, replacing the blurry silhouettes with a clear, fully focused and living narrative space. With the early twentieth-century

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1 See Bialik's essay “Mendele usheloshet hakerakhim” (1912), in H.N. Bialik, *Divary*
translocation of Hebrew literature to Eretz Israel, the importance of achieving a sense of space was further enhanced, as it now had ideological-Zionist ramifications: the space that needed to be artistically brought to life consisted of the earth and sky between which a coherent Jewish national existence had originally come into being and was now to flourish once again. Literary and literal aspirations were united. Thus Yizhar's descriptive achievement amounted in many ways to the realization of a great cultural-artistic dream.

Nowhere in Hebrew literature before and after has the experience of Israeli day and night, in all their details, been given such a full and impressive rendering as in his stories. Sunrise and sunset, the great, heavy heat, and blazing white sun of noon, coldness and dew at night, illuminations and the different shades of darkness, stars of the sky in the three watches of the night, wild plants and the flora of the field in their kinds, insects, reptiles and birds, the steady and imperceptible movement of living things in the heart of the waste, the sundry, well differentiated, rustlings of winds, the various sounds of the night, the feel of the diverse kinds of soil, the very structure of the skeleton of the earth—its protuberances, stony and sharp in the mountainous regions of the country and progressively softening and undulating as the land approaches the sea, the sudden precipitous falls into unexpected depths, and the seductive embrace of soft, feminine-like formations—all these appear in Yizhar's stories in a systematic, almost scientific-encyclopedic completeness, in which a classifying, anatomical bent is united with an exceptional ability to present a unique, extensive and complete poetic impression.

The only appurtenances of civilization allowed to enter Yizhar's fictional world are those which accompany man into the open spaces, whether for work or war. In this sphere as well the array of details is almost complete. For example, in his first extended novella, On the Edge of the Negev (1945), the author presents what might be described as the most lively presence of a machine in Hebrew letters: a waterwell drill, whose being is rendered perceptible and experiential both by an exact detailing of its parts and construction, down to the small-est bolts, the grease, the filthiness, and by a marvelous reenactment, through the rhythms and sound of the descriptive sentences themselves, of its movement, its metallic clangs, its humming and hissing. In a similar fashion, the opening sentences of Midnight Convoy (1950) achieve a rare musical effect by reconstructing the noises of vehicles traveling upon broken roads, with the grating of their springs and brakes, their sudden halts, the groans they utter as they leap over pits and obstacles. The author excels also in conveying the physical nearness of weapons, with their metallic, oily feel, the stringy coarseness of ropes, the sharpness of nails, the cylindricality of poles.

This overwhelming emphasis on the reality and concreteness of the environment rendered the reading of some of Yizhar's stories difficult even for many of his contemporaries, who often recoiled with impatience from his unremitting descriptiveness, which necessarily slowed the action and sometimes buried the plot under its sheer abundance. However, it also intoxicated and bewitched, for never, in any of his stories, was the author's interest in the open landscapes he delineated merely illustrative or pictorial. True, he quite noticeably enjoyed the sheer ability to create, through the medium of language, a detailed and sensuously living reconstruction of the physical, scenic reality. However, that reality was never treated as simply an object of artistic mimesis. Its portrayal emanated not only from a deep love for nature and a precise knowledge of its particulars, but also from an apprehension of it as an exalted and spiritual value, a superior standard of wholeness and cleanliness in the religious, all but ritualistic sense of the term—a standard capable of annulling all opposing standards. Most of his stories, from “Ephraim Goes Back to Alfalfa” (1938) to “The Runaway” (1961), contain the recurrent theme of a yearning for the wild, of a desire to escape the efforts of civilization to cultivate and utilize nature and adapt it to the needs of humanity. This theme is generally expressed in dreams of flight from the constrictive, repetitive monotony of man's day-to-day existence and a longing to escape the immense pressure which every society, and especially a closed, ideologically self-confident and vehemently opinionated one, exerts upon its members. In this context, the evocations

Sifrut, Dvir Publishing House, Tel Aviv 1965, pp. 121-128.

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of space serve as correlates to romantic cravings for total freedom, total liberation from routine and conventionality—an ideal for which all of the author's protagonists yearn, and strive in vain to realize in their lives.

Thus Yizhar's presentation of space plays a double and contradictory role. On the one hand it represents the fulfillment of the central goal of a new Jewish art as articulated by modern Hebrew culture as a whole and Zionist culture in particular. Yet simultaneously, it also subtly and nihilistically undermines the humanist, nationalist ethos of this very culture. Yizhar indeed articulates the new Hebrew craving for reality of location perhaps better than any other modern Jewish author, supplying an element in which the Jewish historical imagination was severely deficient. However, the complex nature of his relationship to the Zionist ethos is perhaps best understood when seen in the context of the approach of the chief philosopher of the Second Aliya, the aforementioned A. D. Gordon, who had a great impact on Yizhar. Gordon was a proponent of the Zionist approach which sought the renewal of Jewish culture through shifting the habitual involvement of the Jewish imagination with text, memory and history to a concern with the immediacy of the elements, of the concrete physical environment. He believed that the central tragedy of the Jewish people lay in the fact that its protracted exilic condition had brought the nation to lose its "cosmic" orientation (i.e., an orientation that viewed human existence as taking place in the context of universal "nature") and so to form its identity only around a common heritage of history and civilization. As he defined nationhood primarily as a natural, almost biological, phenomenon that is fashioned and informed by native environment, for Gordon the loss of the "cosmic" ingredient in the nation's mental makeup meant that its identity was skewed and debased, and that the Jewish people was tragically relegated to a second-hand existence of mental deficiencies and economic dependence. Thus, more than anything else, the Jewish psyche needed a cosmic reorientation, a reengagement with the elements. Yizhar's narrative art can therefore be regarded as the uttermost articulation and aesthetic satisfaction of Gordon's cosmological cravings. At the same time, however, this art also undermines the foundations of Gordonist Zionism, for Gordon advocates a consistent daily routine of manual labor as the only way for a person to genuinely engage with the elements, while Yizhar romantically rejects routine of any kind, and ascribes to nature a transcendence that obliterates all concepts of duty, need, intention, and will. Thus while the Gordonist in Yizhar approves of Ephraim's "going back" to the alfalfa field, the aesthete in him regards this backsliding as capitulation, as becoming ensnared in a trap. This duality of approach developed a keen sensibility within the writer for contradiction and conflict, facilitating his ability to intuit the dichotomies inherent in the Israeli condition. Thus, it plays an important part in Yizhar's positioning as the chief poet of "Israeliness", as we shall see.

Against this dualist backdrop of an intensely experienced space, Yizhar's protagonists, always reflecting their creator, present a contradictory conglomeration of nationalistic Zionism and romantic individualism, and their passionate experience of the landscape contains a similar dichotomy between commitment and flight, between a craving for the material and the real and a nihilistic yearning to indulge in idiosyncratic and spontaneous emotionalism. The human drama in which they participate is always one of conflict and confrontation. The theme of strife is played on quite a few different registers, allowing for a point-counter-point development of internal juxtapositions. The first of these registers is the battle with the environment, with unfor-
battled. For while the protagonists are usually portrayed as an invading army intent on either domesticating the wilderness or fighting its habitual, autochthonic inhabitants, the Palestinian Arabs, nature is rarely presented as a neutral force, but rather as taking sides against the invaders. This does not imply that it is necessarily identified with the interest of the Arabs, as much as that it resents any concentrated effort to upset its own delicate equilibrium as a semi-wilderness that does not allow for more than a marginal human presence. It resents the Zionist will to change it, to press from it the resources needed for intensive human habitation, to harness it to the chariot of the Zionist project, making it feed and clothe millions of people that are too heavy a burden on its free, stony back.

Thus not infrequently the relationship between man and landscape in the stories is one of enmity and mutual distrust. Man, on his side, always attempting to overcome the wilderness, always intent on undermining the secret arrangements that the forces inherent in the landscape have reached in order to maintain stasis. The landscape, in its turn, unleashing these forces in its attempt to resist the elimination of this stasis. Yizhar’s protagonists find themselves in a strange position vis-à-vis this inimical land. On the one hand, they are its children, born “on the crossroads, under a palm tree, beneath a sagging roof of an infant village” that did not offer shelter from the heat, the suffocating hamsin winds, the rains and the insects. On the other hand, they are the children of a besieged enemy, growing up in tiny farm-enclaves surrounded by alien elements, which, held at arm’s length, are constantly pushed back with tremendous effort: “Only up to the fence was there some degree of cultivation, but from there on—thorns” (Days of Ziklag, 1958). Thus their lives are from the first devoid of gentleness and security, and informed by a sense of loneliness, of ecological orphanhood. The author's late and very revealing autobiographical novel Migdamos (Preliminaries) opens with a horrific scene of confrontation between the protagonist as a toddler and an army of alarmed and angry hornets. The baby, left in the shade of a carob tree while his pioneer-father attempts the back-breaking task of plowing a piece of virgin soil that adheres with all the pow-
ers of inertia to its original state of wilderness, unwittingly touches a hornets' nest built in a burrow under the carob. Attacked by dozens of the poisonous insects, the infant has to be carried half-dead, convulsed with unbearable pain, in search of medical help. When after several long hours, a physician is finally reached, all he can say is: If he didn’t die, he’ll live. This scene can be read on several levels. Allegorically it can be seen as presaging the bloody conflict with the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. However, it can also be seen as typifying the relations of man and land as conceived in Yizhar’s fictional world. It is a symbolical dramatization of the clash between human hubris and the permanence of the universe, to which a spiritual, even theological, value has been ascribed: The land is the Lord’s and its position reflects a divine will, which one attempts to contravene at one’s peril. Zionism, in this equation, represents human hubris with all its pathos, glory and tragedy, and its implementation breeds agon, contest, strife.

Another prominent register is the conflict with the Palestinian Arabs, who resisted the Zionist presence in their midst. This conflict was—and remains—absolutely central to all Hebrew culture and literature. From the publication of Ahad Ha’am’s seminal essay “Truth from Eretz Yisrael” in 1891 until the present time, it has been the leitmotiv of the Israeli drama. Many writers set novels, short stories, plays and poems to this backdrop. Military and paramilitary clashes with Arabs supply tension-filled moments as well as dramatic denouements to all the genres developed within the framework of a Zionist culture that progressively became more confrontational and absorbed in the life-or-death choices presented by the struggle over Palestine. However, one can safely say that in the entire Hebrew literature of the twentieth century no writer was more fascinated by this lethal struggle than S. Yizhar. If his very early short stories, written in the late 1930s, such as “Ephraim Goes Back to Alfalfa” and “Paths in the Fields”, were still dominated by other aspects of the Zionist endeavor, from the publication of “A Night Without Shooting” (1940) the focus shifted, and the Arab-Jewish military showdown became the nexus of Yizhar’s fictional world.
The author invested the better part of his creative energy into exploring it. Before writing a fictional work, he would research the military episode or battle he had chosen as the backdrop with all the meticulous care of the most exacting of military historians. For instance, he carefully pieced together every shred of evidence he could gather from the survivors of the battle over Hulda, the sequestered Jewish communal settlement that was abandoned under the pressure of repeated Arab attacks during the riots of the summer of 1929, before weaving it together with astounding loyalty to the verifiable facts in The Grove on the Hill. Similarly, the plot of Midnight Convoy, which focuses on the last military convoy that managed to break through the lines of the Egyptian army to bring desperately needed supplies and reinforcements to the cut-off and beleaguered Jewish settlements in the Negev, was based on a meticulous reconstruction of the actual event. The amount of research and factual verification that went into the writing of Days of Ziklag astounded military experts, who opined that perhaps no battle of the many battles of the 1948 War was as rigorously reconstructed and as minutely re-experienced, moment by moment, as was the seven-days battle over Hirbet Mehaz, which Yizhar then transplanted from historical reality into the huge novel whose plot it determined. Yizhar’s fascination with the Arab-Jewish conflict manifested itself in complete historical verismimilitude, which formed the matrix into which he fit the fictional elements such as the protagonists and their respective streams of consciousness. Of course, those fictional elements were not disconnected from the conflict either. They consisted of the experiences of war—the fears, the dark premonitions, the many boring hours of listless inactivity, the dark elan of battle, the unexpected gushes of courage, the panic of being shot at, hit, or critically wounded, the loss of consciousness and the drifting into the emptiness of impending death—these are the sensations and emotions that interested the author more than anything else.

The relentless focus on battle creates the impression that Yizhar’s fascination extends beyond the political and historical significance of the Arab-Jewish conflict per se. Battle seems to be the form of existence most appealing to his creative imagination and most conductive to the articulation of his sense of being. For on the one hand, it presents an experience which is set into place by history and informed by rules and fias over which the individual has little, if any, control, while on the other hand it grants separate moments of a stormy and overwhelming sense of individual being; moments brimming with mental activity and visceral existential sensations. Thus it offers a unique model of existence: chaotic yet prescribed and unchangeable; deadly yet bursting with mental life; continuously and sequentially evolving, each occurrence unfolding as the unavoidable result of the events which preceded it, yet simultaneously broken into disparate unrelated units of experienced time, each forming a world unto itself. This duality appealed to Yizhar as exposing with sharp intensity the very essence of the experience of being in the world with its paradoxical, even absurd, comingle of oppositions: predetermination and freedom, unrelenting exterior causality and the unexpected tides and whirlpools of a seething and uncontrolled interiority.

For Yizhar, the Arab plays the role of the ultimate “other” in this drama. As such, he is inevitably Janus-faced, a figure both bright and dark at one and the same time. On the one hand, he is perceived as an organic outgrowth of the landscape, its human representative. He therefore can at times be idealized, endowed with the grace and harmony of unperturbed nature, and identified with the most hallowed biblical figures. For example, in the beginning of “The Prisoner”, the Arab shepherds are presented as part of an Edenic scene of idyllic hills covered by ancient olive trees and brilliantly illuminated by the golden light of the afternoon sun, “leading their flocks tranquilly across the unchanged fields and quiet hills, with the casual stride of those good times when trouble had not yet come” (p.66). They are figures in a holy template of flocks and shepherds “from the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” silhouetted against a distant backdrop of biblical villages “with [a] frieze of olives” gleaming like a bas-relief of “dull copper” (p.66). In comparison, the Jewish soldiers, who hunt and eventually interrogate one of the shepherds, are introduced as burdened with the modern machinery of warfare, and are not only mundane, shallow, sweaty, and graceless, but actually a dangerous
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alien element which, attempting to “penetrate” (p. 115) this “world of hills” (p. 116), is about to destroy it.

This, however, is only one side of the portrayal of the Arab village in the story—the distant, picturesque and idealized version. The other side emerges as the soldiers approach an actual village that has recently been conquered and evacuated. The narrator’s impressions of the village as observed from close quarters are saturated with such an intense sense of disgust, alienation, and lack of empathy, that his very sentences, usually complex, well-rounded and mellifluous, suddenly become choppy, truncated and discordant: “A forsaken ant-hill, the rags and tatters of human life. The mustiness of don’t-give-a-damn. A stinking, flea-bitten, lice-infested existence. The poverty and dolefulness of miserable villages. All of a sudden their outskirts, their homes, their courtyards, their inmost sanctums had been laid bare” (p. 70). At this point, it is the Jewish soldiers who become the endangered invaders. Using this sink of iniquity as their quarters, they become contaminated, as if the surrounding scaly infestation gradually covers not only their skin but also their mind and souls with its ugly scabs.

The depictions of the Arab village are two sides of one coin, which is that of total alienation—an alienation which is equally manifest in idealization and demonization, and which allows the presentation of the Arab villager as both a biblical patriarch and a shred of “the tatters of human existence” within the compass of a single short story. The Zionist culture that Yizhar absorbed and gave expression to was that of the post 1929 so-called riots, which actually amounted to the first round in the Arab-Jewish continuous war. Before 1929, the dream of Arab-Jewish fraternization was very prevalent and influenced the image of the Arab in Jewish art and literature. It allowed for both an Orientalist stylization of the Arab (particularly the Bedouin) as a “noble savage”, a man of courage, beauty, magnanimity, and stormy genuine emotions, as well as convincing realistic portrayals (such as in Y. Shami’s masterful novella, The Vengeance of the Fathers, 1928). However, after the 1929 war, even the leaders of Labor Zionism, such as David Ben-Gurion, realized that the Palestinian nationalist move-

Yizhar’s aforementioned dualism is related to another brand of his thematics of strife. Lack of inner harmony breeds strife in its most basic form, that of internal conflict, and indeed such tension stands at the very core of Yizhar’s work. His chief protagonists are always presented as agitated by some kind of intrinsic turmoil, which often is articulated in the form of a dialogue between two or more inner voices which express contradictory attitudes. Two of the 1948 war stories, “The Prisoner” and The Story of Hirbet Hiz‘ah, illustrate this interior dialogue in its most heated and explicit form, where its moral and political ramifications are intentionally emphasized. However, the intrinsic dualism also pervades stories where no overt conflict or self-contradiction is evident. For the internal strife in Yizhar’s stories emanates, as we have seen, from a deeply entrenched conflicted sense of being. This often, though not always, manifests itself in the interaction of the protagonist with a peer group or collective to which he belongs and yet also does not belong. The ambiguous interaction is not necessarily predicated on the objective circumstances under which the protagonist and the group he at least partly identifies with operate; and even when it is conditioned by such circumstances—particularly...
in stories where the protagonist is part of a military unit with a combative mission—the uneasy attitude of the protagonist toward his peers does not necessarily flow from disapproval of the group's behavior (though clearly it does in the two works mentioned above). Strangely, but very tellingly, this attitude can emerge at moments when the protagonist is wholeheartedly committed to the group's activity, and feels only admiration and strong emotional attachment to the members of the company who shoulder the burden of difficulty and danger which the activity entails. Thus, for example, Tzvialeh, the protagonist of *Midnight Convoy*, sings a paean of love for the large group of soldiers he has just watched marching under the weight of their heavy weaponry to battle and danger, intent upon the serious and possibly lethal business of facing the enemy, yet making no gestures of either doubt or self-aggrandizement; but nonetheless, even while experiencing the rush of heartfelt identification and admiration, he is unable to hush the inner voice that keeps whispering that even now, “in the midst of all these things you have not forgotten your fancies and your wild and worthless dreams...even as the ground trembled you did not forget your trivial self” (p. 163-164).

The conflict between the acknowledged need to participate in the effort of the collective and the suppressed rejection of it as an irksome nuisance can be seen as the fundamental reality of Yizhar's work, both on the cultural and psychological level. As such, it has a nearly autonomous existence in most of the author's stories, regardless of their specific details.

Culturally, it can be viewed as reflecting the basic dichotomy between the Zionist ethos and the modernist spiritual and artistic *Weltanschauung*. The former emphasized collectivism, ethnicity and nationalism, and was based on an essentially optimistic view regarding the ability to change and greatly ameliorate one's condition through the full activation of will power. The latter focused on the individual as a separated unit, on the loneliness of modern man within an alienated environment, on his inability to escape the essentially meaningless limitations of the *condition humaine*. Yizhar, more than any other Israeli writer, straddled this divide, and was genuinely committed both to the Zionist ethos and to the modernist view of the human condition. He therefore could not avoid the dualism and the inner strife so rife in his work.

In this respect he resembles Y.H. Brenner more than the artist closest to his heart, U.N. Gnessin. For Gnessin, the early Hebrew modernist par excellence, fully and unconditionally adopted the view asserting the complete loneliness of modern man, and with great virtuosity evolved the artistic methods and devices that could best convey the existential experience of such alienation. Brenner, in contrast, though philosophically committed to a modernist-existentialist view of the human condition, was equally informed by the collectivist mores of the Russian intelligentsia and the nationalist ethos of the "New", post-traditional Hebrew culture and literature, which ascribed to the Jewish intellectual and writer the role of a latter day prophet, “a watchman unto the house of Israel”, the custodian entrusted with looking after the national well-being. Alienated as he often was, Brenner would never renege on the duty of the intellectual to constantly conduct and articulate what he himself viewed as a collective "*ha'arakhat atzmenu*", a term that can be roughly translated as collective self-evaluation or self-criticism. Thus Yizhar can be described as a writer and an intellectual who was constantly vacillating between the model of Gnessin (whom he admired and emulated as an artist) and the model of Brenner (whom he admired and emulated as a moralist).

Psychologically, Yizhar's dualism emanated from sources that become fully apparent only in his late autobiographical works written in the 1990s, particularly the aforementioned short novel *Preliminaries*. What in the earlier works seems to assert itself as an unquenchable thirst for personal freedom can retrospectively be understood as springing from a personality-deficiency ingrained in the writer's character from a very early age. In *Preliminaries*, the author traces the course of a breakdown of personality, which from early childhood undermines appropriate socialization and renders social adaptation of any kind a burden almost too heavy to bear. This deficiency is explored with exemplary moral and artistic integrity. The author reconstructs
the conditions which defined his character when still a young child as that of the halfhearted outsider, the one who did not really belong, no matter how desperately he wished to mix and associate with the peers he liked. Little did it help that everything and everyone around him worked to make him deeply conscious of the need to integrate himself into the collective, as it was only through collective effort that the historical task of realizing the Zionist dream could be achieved. He describes the weakness, insufficiency and bitterness of an aging father, whose ceaseless conscientious hard work since making aliyah to Israel as an eighteen-year-old idealist never won him either the recognition or the modest financial security he deserved; the tormenting ambivalence of admiration and intense jealousy toward an older sibling, brilliant, handsome, robust, adventurous, happy, and obviously preferred by all and sundry, father, mother, comrades and adoring girlfriends alike; an awkward self-awareness of being physically unprepossessing and sexually undesirable. All these made for a tenuous, insecure and ambivalent internal self-image, which extended outwardly to the relationship with the group he yearned to join and yet also shunned. “Even when they are all together,” the protagonist of Preliminaries remembers, “there is always one who is left on his own... even when they all belong, there is always one who does not entirely belong. Or let’s say he belongs yet doesn’t belong, or not wholly, or not all the time, even if he is with them all the time.” It was as if the protagonist was doomed to play the role of mere observer, watching others from the sidelines, recording their presence as if amassing some kind of knowledge or keeping a record that would enable him to bear evidence in some as-yet-unknown future. And therefore “it’s as though all the time he is required to explain something about himself, to make excuses or apologize, instead of admitting, leave me alone, friends, let me be and don’t wait for me.” And yet at the same time he is torn by his own internal ambivalence, and something within him pleads “wait for me, I’m coming too, wait for me I’m coming too.”

2 All references are from Nicholas de Lange’s translation of Preliminaries. New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2007, p. 16.
forme maîtresse, the interior monologue. To present a collective, he instead rapidly shifts the focus of the interior monologue from one character within the group to another, thus developing a "choir" effect. Yizhar's *Grove on the Hill* and *Days of Ziklag* are completely different in tone, structure and intellectual implications than Romaine's two great war novels *Prelude to Verdun* and *Verdun* (vols. 15-16 in his 27 volume roman fleuve) or Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (another great war novel somewhat influenced by the unamist concept). More tightly tied to the high modernism stream of consciousness fiction, Yizhar's war novel, despite its polyphony, does not offer, in the final analysis, a unified or collective view of the war. Instead it presents a conglomerate of many individual views, each idiosyncratic and closed within itself. Paradoxically, the loneliness of the individual and his sense of alienation from an absurd reality are arguably never more accentuated in Yizhar's work than in his vast war novel, which focuses on the activity of a unified military group. What is more, as one navigates through the high waters of *Days of Ziklag*, one comes to realize that the interior monologues offered seriatim become more distinct in style and captivating in emotional content the closer the respective monologist is to the habitual Yizhar protagonist, with his insecurity, internal conflicts and dreams of individualistic freedom. When the author "dubs" characters that do not share these characteristics, the artistic level of the interior monologue quickly plummets. The result is that many of the atypical characters are hardly distinguishable one from the other, and their respective monologues, too similar in both content and style, are eminently forgettable. Thus, even in his heroic attempt to tell the tale of an epoch and of the generation of youngsters faced to bear the brunt of the 1948 War, the author never really distanced himself from his initial modernistic-individualistic paradigm.

Even in the stories meant to produce a choir-like, rather than solo effect, it is the protagonist who stands at the edge even as he attempts to support the group in its collective effort, functioning as an observer if not a severe critic, that remains at the very core of Yizhar's fiction. Indeed, looking at Yizhar's work as a whole, one can argue that the psychological dynamics of individualism and belonging which prescribe the centrality of the protagonist are the same as those which made the narration itself possible or perhaps even inevitable. For it is the distinct sense of being somewhat out of sync with others that not only produces the distance needed for observation and artistic description, but also creates the need for such creative endeavor as a compensatory procedure through which the alienated individual can counterbalance his sense of insignificance and marginality. In *Preliminaries*, where the author rigorously explores the sources of his own cultural and artistic mission, this compensatory aspect of his creative activity is squarely faced and acknowledged.

Paradoxically, Yizhar's enduring loyalty to his initial sense of marginality, of not belonging, or at least, to use his words, of being one who "does not entirely belong, or not wholly, or not all the time," strengthened rather than weakened his position as the quintessential Israeli writer. As much as it was frowned upon by ideologues and literary commissars, it endeared him to his avowed readers and enabled him to delve deeper than others into the depths of the common Israeli experience. Again, the late autobiographical works of the 1990s shed much light on this aspect of his cultural representativeness. There, particularly in the brilliant collection of short stories published under the telling title *Tzadadiyim* (the English "Asides" does not convey the full meaning of the word, which also means "peripherals", pieces not adhering to the center), Yizhar finally acknowledges the fact that his own loneliness, expressed in that of his characteristic protagonist, was not as unique as he had thought; that in fact the entire collectivist ethos with its triple emphases on nationalism, socialism, and vibrant, future-oriented, activism, had been to a large extent a façade under which a welter of loneliness, alienation, and a sense of personal discontinuity hid, or rather was forcefully repressed and denied—for official Zionist ethos and culture, like those proclaimed by most national and social revolutionary movements, was repressive and predicated on self-denial. In many of the *Tzadadiyim* stories,
for instance, the protagonists are those European-born youngsters who in the late 1930s or even during the first years of World War II were rescued through a massive and well organized effort of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization and brought from Europe to Palestine, where they were cared for and educated in special educational-agricultural institutions such as the village of Ben Shemen, where Yizhar himself spent more than a decade as a teacher. Rescued from extermination, recipients of the best the Zionist educational system had to offer, these youngsters were encouraged “to put the past behind them” and develop an upbeat, future-oriented mood befitting the prospective builders of a new and idealistic Jewish society. The past they were supposed to forget included parents, siblings, and other relatives they had left behind, of whose fate they were as yet ignorant. It also included their mother-tongues (German, Yiddish, Polish) and the modern European or traditionalist “exilic” Jewish culture they had absorbed. They were supposed to adopt new names and new personalities, a new language, a new body language and new behavioral patterns. Most of them heroically lived up to their educators’ expectations. Underneath this veneer of successful acculturation, however, they were often miserable and psychologically scarred, and many of them would have to struggle throughout their lives with the inevitable consequences of unacknowledged and untreated traumas. These were extreme cases, but it was not only these newcomers who could identify with the inherent loneliness and sadness of Yizhar’s protagonists. Those who were born and raised in Israel, like Yizhar, were also supposed to repress childhood traumas and renounce youthful aspirations. The child mathematician or musician or future writer knew that “history” prohibited the realization of his aspirations; that they had to join a communal agricultural farm and deal with grain, cattle or alfalfa. The youngster who was genuinely interested in ideas had to train as a soldier rather than a philosopher; the idealist had to become an active party member; the poet had better hide his verses unless they served the national cause. Yizhar became the spokesman of all these repressed intellectuals and artists. He was the one who could reach the painfully discarded dreams and articulate their contents precisely because his protagonist halfheartedly justified the repression of these dreams and identified with the ethos that demanded it. The anarchism and individualism that informed his sense of being were acceptable because they were well reined in. Yizhar rendered a formidable cultural service: by articulating the pain inflicted by a collectivism that was at one and the same time voluntary and coercive, his work served as a safety valve. It protected the normative cultural pressure cooker from explosion or implosion by providing an opening which released some of the tension.

Yizhar’s fiction generally falls into three sections: the early work, which the author wrote in his twenties, opens with “Ephraim Goes Back to Alfalfa”, written in 1938, and culminates with The Grove on the Hill, which appeared in 1947 in a collection that also contained much of the earlier stories. The second section, written between 1948 and 1961, subsists primarily of the monumental novel Days of Ziklag, a group of war stories which preceded it, including “The Prisoner” and Midnight Convoy, and several stories written after its publication in 1958. The third section consists of the late works written in the 1990s, when Yizhar made a comeback as a fiction writer after nearly three decades of silence. It was launched with Preliminaries (1992) and included, besides the sequel Tzalhavim (“Radiances”, 1993), three collections of novellas and short stories as well as a book that for the lack of better definition we shall describe as a “personal reportage”.

In the early work, the distinctive components of the author’s narrative style began to coalesce in a series of stories dealing with life in the communal settlements and the clashes with the Arabs during the 1939 and 1936–1939 riots. Here the struggle with harsh nature is paralleled by the struggle with an enemy that progressively becomes more threatening. Artistically, it was in this period that the author
perfected the main narrative tool he was to use for the next two
decades: the interior monologue as practiced by writers of stream of
consciousness fiction.

In the second group of stories, written in the period between
1948 and 1958, the War of Independence absorbed the author's entire
creative energy, and the stream of consciousness modality attained
full ripeness. Yizhar focused on both the external circumstances and
the internal mental experience of warfare, investing tremendous effort
into crafting the large-scale novel which would become the definitive
Israeli work of fiction dealing with military combat. He occasion-
ally found respite from this heavy burden in lighthearted short sto-
ries written for young readers, hankering back to a seemingly happy
childhood among orchards and farms, which were collected in two
volumes: Six Summer Stories and Barefoot.

After the publication of Days of Ziklag the author, exhausted
and somewhat disoriented, began looking for new topics and narra-
tive modalities. He attempted to expand the approach he had de-
veloped in the stories for young readers by infusing the pseudo-idyllic
memoirist manner with the seriousness, indeed, the sense of tragedy,
which had now come to characterize his view of the human con-
tion. The combination resulted in the short story “Habakuk” (1960),
in which his staple narrative technique of interior monologue was
replaced for the first time by the seemingly loquacious ramblings of
a retrospective memoirist. The narrator, reminiscing about his ear-
lier years, addresses a group of listeners-readers, telling them about a
relationship he had when in the midst of the crisis of puberty with a
unique, somewhat eccentric but entirely benevolent amateur music-
ian, who eventually played an important role in his life. This music-
ian ends up being tragically killed in a war in which he had hardly
participated. In this story, Yizhar discovered a new narrative vein.

However, he did not immediately follow and explore it. Instead
he took leave of prose fiction in an expressionist novella A Story That
Had Not Started in which he furiously mingled in a repetitious cycle
interior monologue, dramatic reenactment of painful memory, and a
highly emotional jeremiad against the mundane reality of a new Israel
bereft of its pioneering idealism and naiveté. It conveyed, more than
anything, the author’s sheer impatience with the art of storytelling
per se. With this novella or poem-in-prose, published together with
“Habakuk”, “The Runaway” and several other stories in the collection
Plain Stories (1963), the author seemed to slam the door in the face of
his readers, leaving Israeli prose fiction in the hands of younger writ-
ers such as Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, and eventually Yaakov Shabtai
(for whom Yizhar had the highest regard). Yizhar himself turned to an
altogether different discourse—polemic, argumentative and at times
pseudo-academic—dealing with matters such as the correct reading
and interpretation of narrative, the impossibility of humanistic edu-
cation as well as issues pertaining to the morality and immorality of
Israeli politics and public life.

Upon returning to prose fiction in the 1990s, Yizhar came back
to the genre he had experimented with in “Habakuk”, developing
it further. Innovatively exploring and fleshing out a special autobi-
ographical manner, in which memoir, stream of consciousness, and an
elegiac lyricism emanating from the amalgamation of vividly remem-
bered moments of youth with the wisdom of old age, he produced a
sequence of stories in which the origins of his own life-in-art were
examined with brutal honesty.

The current selection represents all three phases in the author’s
trajectory. It includes the signature story, “Ephraim Goes Back to
Alfalfa”, a first publication of a very young writer which nevertheless
clearly announces the presence of a master and contains many of
the characteristic features of the author’s more mature work, clearly
displaying Yizhar’s narrative art at its inceptive stage. It also includes
“Habakuk”: the author’s first step toward his late style, and “Harlamov”
(from the Tedadiym cycle, 1996), which exemplifies this style in its
mature form, both focusing on the transcendence of music and its
liberating potential—a topic of the highest significance for Yizhar’s
aesthetics and poetics. Representing the middle phase of the author’s
career is the novella Midnight Convoy, written as the turmoil of the
1948 War subsided but the gray Israeli “morning after” had hardly
dawned. The story was thus written in a very particular historical
milieu, with some initial distance from the battle experience allowing for a modicum of emotional restraint, but with the memory of war still so fresh as to hardly be regarded as memory. At this unique moment Yizhar wrote his most lyrical and optimistic story, a novella reverberating with the specific tonality of the time, the days in which the State of Israel, having just been born in blood and fire, took a first look in the mirror, pondering its own face. *Midnight Convoy* demonstrates the author's narrative art at its best and most characteristic, which justifies its place as the centerpiece of the current selection—and allows it to serve as an exemplum for exploring Yizhar's reputation as Israel's chief master of prose fiction. To this novella the balance of our remarks in this introductory essay is dedicated.

First it is important to delineate the extrinsic event which inspired the novella, for it served as more than a mere backdrop. As a matter of fact, the occurrence itself—the passing of the military convoy in the darkness of a moonless night on its way to the besieged Jewish settlements of the northern Negev—is the main topic of the story, and completely determines its plot. It took place in the summer of 1948, during an uneasy lull in the military activities of both the Israelis and their opponents. With the ferocious battles of the spring behind them, the two sides, exhausted and desperately needing both to re-organize and to strengthen whatever positions they had managed to occupy, twice agreed to temporary cessations of hostilities supervised by the UN. While the questionable lull held, each side was absorbed in preparations for the continuation of the war, which would resume within a few weeks. At this mid-point, the fortunes of the war had somewhat changed. The initial grave danger to the main Jewish concentration along the sea coast, which for a time, immediately after the invasion of Palestine by the conventional armies of six Arab states in May, had seemed to threaten the very existence of nascent Israel, had been overcome. The Egyptian armed column, which had reached the agricultural settlements and the towns adjacent to Tel Aviv itself, had been pushed back to the border area which separated the northern Negev from the southern coastal plain, and the entire area between Tel Aviv and the mountainous region, heavily populated by Arab villagers and town dwellers, was under Jewish control, with most of its inhabitants fleeing their homes to the mountains held by the Jordanian Arab Legion. Jerusalem was still under siege by the Legion, but the situation there had somewhat improved due to the trailblazing of a makeshift road which allowed the Israelis to replenish the starving city with the essentials, enabling it to keep resisting the besieging army and its ancillary local Palestinian forces. The Israeli strategists now turned their attention to the south. There, the Egyptian army, stronger, larger, armed with tanks and assisted by an air force—and thus more dangerous than all the other Arab armies put together—had established a well fortified line which stretched all the way from the sea to the Judean mountains, some units reaching as far as the southern suburbs of Jerusalem. This line efficiently cut the country in two, separating the northern Jewish concentrations from the Negev, where a few, sequestered Jewish settlements, all under heavy siege, were fighting for their lives. Clearly, the intention of the Egyptians was to cut off this vast and relatively empty area—in size about half of the territory of Palestine as a whole and the better part of the Jewish state according to the UN partition plan of 1947—from the evolving Jewish "entity", should it manage to survive the war, thus reducing the Jewish state to a miniscule enclave with little, if any, unoccupied terrain to accommodate the immigration of millions of Jews. This truncation of the prospective Jewish territory was also very much in line with colonial British interests, as the British were worried by the proximity of the Jews, then supported by the Soviet Union and its allies, to the Red Sea. The UN emissary, Count Bernadotte, had therefore already raised the suggestion of exchanging the entire Negev for the western part of the Galilee (belonging within the
Palestinian state, according to the original partition plan), already occupied by the Israeli army.

Defeating the Egyptian-British strategy was now the vital interest of Israel. The Negev had to be saved as part of the Jewish state, and for that purpose the Jewish settlements there had to be strengthened, replenished, and made ready for battle, so that once the temporary cessation of hostilities ended, the Egyptian army could be engaged from the north and the south alike, and eventually squeezed into an enclave where the IDF could attack from all directions. While the quiet held, the paramount need was to somehow cross the Egyptian line, if possible without undermining the ongoing hafuga (lull, pause), and resupply the Jewish forces behind it with food, medicine, ammunition, and fresh troops, without which they could not be expected to withstand the pressure of the Egyptian siege. This was the background for operations such as the one described in full detail in Yizhar’s novella. The weaker links along the chain of Egyptian positions had to be found, makeshift roads surreptitiously charted within a few hours—otherwise the Israelis would be detected and attacked—and convoys subsisting of both units of infantry and trucks loaded with essential materiel had to be smuggled under the protecting darkness of the midnight hours. Such operations were kept to a minimum, and the configuration of each was unique, since similar attempts would certainly be blocked by the Egyptians. Thus the success of every one of them was critical.

Essentially, the novella is about such an operation. It opens in the late afternoon, as a group of soldiers, whose mission is to chart a road for an expected convoy, arrives at a spot that has been estimated as offering relatively safe passage. It is a large deserted area, a no-man’s-land between the two armies, consisting partly of arable stretches, where the crops have not been garnered due to the flight of the local peasants, and partly of low but craggy hills, deep ravines and dry wadis—the characteristic geological formation of Palestine as it gradually and leisurely progresses from its sharp mountainous backbone toward its flat coastal plain. From the very beginning, the scene is enveloped in thick curtains of fatty dust, as the soil in the upper reaches of the Negev, though fertile, is very powdery. Its sods disintegrate under the slightest pressure, and the tiny particles are scattered through the air by the slightest wind, all the more so by the motion of heavy vehicles. It seems to the protagonist that this soil was made for the light touch of the bare feet of peasants or at most for the delicate hooves of donkeys, but not for Jeeps and trucks, which stir it, filling the air with a milky, opaque substance that penetrates everything—eyes, mouths, hair, every crevice in the skin.

The poorly equipped group must rapidly chart a path that will make it possible for the convoy, particularly the heavily loaded trucks, to pass. It must be completed before nightfall. They quickly get started, surveying the terrain, which is quite different from what they had been told based on the fuzzy aerial photos available. Most chart the trail, which they mark by piling stones and connecting the heaps with white paper ribbons that are supposedly discernable in total darkness. The rest are sent on a reconnaissance mission to the outskirts of the nearest Egyptian outpost, where they are to be on the lookout for any suspicious activity that might indicate that the enemy has been alerted; if possible, they are also to mine the area between the outpost and the paved road the convoy is to use once it circumvents it, thus halting any Egyptian attempt to give chase and attack the convoy from the rear. Night descends. All preparations have more or less been set in place, and a protracted period of nervous expectation, as they wait for the arrival of the convoy, begins. At last, another platoon of soldiers, an assistance force, arrives, including a young woman who operates a wireless connection with headquarters. Eventually, the convoy itself appears. First march the infantry units—a few hundred troops—carrying their heavy machine guns and boxes of ammunition; then, arriving very late because of difficulties along the way, the heavy trucks finally emerge. Slowly and painfully they navigate their way along the makeshift trail, cross a deep wadi, and clamber with engines roaring under the strain onto the opposite bank, where they continue their slow progress.

At last the mission is accomplished and the caravan,
encountering very slight resistance as it passes by the Egyptian outpost, is on its way southward to its destination. Two trucks hit mines and are left behind so as not to slow the progress of the convoy as a whole, which must be far behind the Egyptian lines—and thus relatively out of the danger zone—before dawn. One soldier is killed, and several others wounded. As the convoy passes out of sight, the tension that kept the members of the group awake and edgy throughout the night is replaced by fatigue and half-sleep, with which the story ends.

Yizhar's choice of this particular episode as the topic of his most comprehensive war narrative before the Days of Ziklag requires exploration. Strategically important as the operation was, it does not make for an action-packed war story. A hazardous affair in its own right, it nonetheless was very different from both the battles that had preceded it and the ones that took place in its wake. Tzviah, the protagonist, even tells himself that this is a different kind of war, a "peaceful" war, so to speak. Yet it is important to note that even as he savors this moment of "peace", Tzviah is haunted by memories of the battles he has seen, which he forcefully tries to repress. One image, however, keeps obsessively reappearing, metonymically representing the horrors that he is trying to forget: a cadaver burnt beyond recognition, but for a single foot, still shod in a sandal with a rubber sole cut from a Dunlop tire, the Dunlop logo visibly embossed upon it. Though he speaks of a lull, Tzviah knows that it is fleeting, its peacefulness imaginary. The undercurrents of fear and danger are ever trickling through the depths of his consciousness—"tonight I am stumbling on a mine," he thinks. What is more, he is fully aware that the mission his group has been entrusted with is nothing if not a preparation for battles that will be every bit as ferocious as those he has just undergone. Toward the end of the story he openly acknowledges the reality of the situation: "No escape. It was naive to think we could have broken the siege with a convoy. Convoys are all well and good in a nice, peaceful sort of war—but they won't work here. You can't occupy territory with convoys, you can't break a siege or win the peace. To do that you have to die, over and over again. You're not out of it yet, my boy.... Always have to die, always.... That's the way it goes. It doesn't matter whether you want to kill or not, to be killed or not—nothing can help you anymore." (p. 202-203). Yet despite the dark undertones, and the continuous awareness of the fragility of the calm, the fact that Yizhar chose a relatively quiet moment as the basis for his tale cannot be accidental. Understanding his reasons is an essential part of understanding this novella.

I believe that Yizhar's choice was guided by four different considerations. The first was thematic: in Midnight Convoy, he wished to explore the positive and uplifting aspects of the 1948 War. This is in contradistinction to his presentation of the war in two earlier stories, "The Prisoner" and The Story of Hirbet Hiz'lah, in which he scathingly criticized what he perceived as the systematic expulsion of the Palestinian peasantry. As the stormy polemics triggered by these two stories were raging, the author wanted to remind himself and his readers of the other side of the war: the defense of the Jews of Palestine from physical annihilation and the preparation of the foundations for the independent State of Israel. In Days of Ziklag these aspects of the war would drown in a boiling sea of carnage, and the war would be portrayed as the living hell experienced by those who fought and died in it. In Midnight Convoy, the focus on a maneuver relatively distant from the front experience, which has an obviously beneficial and life-saving character, offers another view of the war, especially in conjunction with the enthusiasm and naiveté of the protagonist. What is more, the wide strategic perspective prescribed by the attempt to save the besieged settlers of the Negev and together with them, the Negev itself as a part of the Jewish state, enables the author to view the war as a historic whole, to see it as the event which brought about the birth of Israel. This emphasis of the positive aspects of the war extends beyond the national into the personal, as we shall see.
Introduction

The second consideration was stylistic, and had to do with pace and rhythm. Yizhar's meticulous historical accuracy dictated that the events he depicted needed to be closely aligned with the narrative pace he wished to follow. This particular historical moment allowed for an evolving, relatively non-dramatic tale characterized by a slow narrative pace and a leisurely descriptivism. While this might have disappointed readers who were looking for action and the heightened emotionality of choppy battle descriptions, it had its own rich compensations. It enabled the author to fully focus on his primary interest: the sheer experience of "being" in an open, uninhabited space. Rarely do we encounter in literature so sensitive and sustained a rendering of such experience as the one presented here.

As noted above, the terrain described consists of neglected arable fields and wild hills and ravines untouched by human hands. This combination elicits a dual response from the protagonist. On the one hand, it triggers a sense of sadness, as if he identifies with the "pain" of the earth whose plenteous crops are withering away. The wasted fecundity dovetails with Tzviahle's sense of his own devastated life-force, his many emotions and reflections doomed, like the grains that have not been properly harvested, to serve no purpose and, left unused, to decay; for Tzviahle possesses neither the social skills nor the emotional maturity that would enable him to channel his emotions and thoughts into constructive action or even to transmit them to a sympathetic listener. On the other hand, untamed, wild nature arouses in Tzviahle the impulse to combat the open spaces and overcome the impediments with which they seem to intentionally block his progress. After all, it his task, his military mission, to rein in the wilderness and force it to serve both himself and his comrades. This dual relationship to the landscape creates a delicate ambiguity in the projection of space throughout the story.

Tzviahle's great sensitivity to spatial impressions elicits from him a rich array of conflicting emotional responses. Starting with his disgusted sensitivity to the enveloping dust and its penetrative quality (rendered by the virtuoso descriptive overture to the story)—the dust seems as much a protagonist of the story as any of the human characters—these impressions lead to moments of the purest elegiac lyricism in which Tzviahle projects onto the landscape his deepest sense of forlornness and unrequited yearning for sympathy. He etches into the landscape a self-portrait of sorts, a paradigm of his sensibilities and the harsh realities which confront and stymie them. Thus he attempts to personify the soil as a warm, delicate and embracing body:

The soil beneath them was warm and chunky, and the hill's hump slouched on, forward, its peaceful folds trimmed with lacy fringes of gold—the oat-like wild grasses, woven between them, about a foot above the ground, transparent in a trembling halo of light, delicate golden-yellow bells, a fresh and heart-warming tremor suspended in the air. (pp. 101-102).

But other impressions must be acknowledged, for the delicate halo of the husks is truncated at the craggy and uncouth channel of the wadi. Then the field at night plays tricks with the senses and undermines Tzviahle's self-orientation. It maliciously leads him into labyrinthine mazes, cutting him off his comrades, reducing his stature and self-confidence, waking him an inner orphaned babe in the woods. Thus the landscape simultaneously represents a lovely, yielding femininity and an inimical environment with its intrinsic chaos, the harshness and ill-will of reality and the fragility and fragmentation of the self.

This ambiguity in the landscape is somewhat counterbalanced by a meticulous attention to vehicles and machines, which represent in this context the reliability and helpfulness of human invention and camaraderie. Hence the almost over-sensitive attention directed to cars of various types and uses, their speed and how they slow when faced with difficulties, their groaning noises, their vulnerability to mechanical failure, their awkwardness once the privilege of a paved road has been swept from beneath their wheels, and the great care and joint effort required for getting them back on track. To a very large extent, the drama of war is replaced in Midnight Convoy by the drama of exposure to open space, which can be both humanized and
projected as an extension of the protagonist's interiority and slightly demonized and projected as man's enemy.

The third consideration in focusing on this particular historic moment is closely related to the second, and had to do with the artistic potential of the stream of consciousness narrative modality in the exploration of character. As we have seen, the landscape itself, as processed through the vivid impressions of the protagonist's consciousness, highlights essential characteristics of that protagonist. But the experience of space is only one of the many means Yizhar employs to thoroughly examine his character: The slow pace of the narration allows for the gradual emergence of a sense of Tzvialeh's personality. As a matter of fact, *Midnight Convoy* offers Yizhar's most intimate, close-up view of his typical protagonist, the habitual diffident, non-assertive young man, who "belongs" within the group he is affiliated with but at the same time does not altogether "belong"—a view that is here informed by the sensibility and delicacy which single out this novella as a whole. In Tzvialeh the author created nothing less than the most sensitive portrayal of his ubiquitous anti-hero, a portrayal which nonetheless is neither romanticized nor self-serving. Tzvialeh is projected as a very immature and insecure young man, who, deeply craving intimacy with other human beings, constantly experiences his own marginality and loneliness. More pathetic than attractive, he is a character with whom the reader can empathize rather than identify. The name itself, with its childish diminution, is not devoid of a glint of sarcasm (*tsvi*—a deer; *Tzvialeh*—a diminutive deer, a Bambi-like creature, naive, easily frightened, in need of protection). The forces which formed him, why and how he came to be as he is, are not made explicit, just as little is told of his life before the war—most probably a life characterized by deficit attention and appreciation, leading to a lowly self-image. Everything known about Tzvialeh is gathered through the impressions and emotions that percolate through his stream of consciousness or through his interactions with other characters. Thus the slow pace of the novella allows for an immersion in the protagonist's immature subjectivism and interior restlessness. For instance, it allows a thorough exploration of his yearning for a father figure. Obviously, Tzvialeh's actual father, mentioned once in passing as an elderly, benevolent but detached figure, did not provide a steady, supportive presence, and the younger is therefore starved for a protective father-figure. This is expressed in Tzvialeh's interaction with the middle-aged Rubinstein, the commander of the unit responsible for the preparations for the passage of the convoy. While Rubinstein, in his low-keyed and down to earth manner, is completely consumed by his awareness of the critical importance of the operation and the need to do everything possible in order to ensure its success, Tzvialeh is overwhelmed by personal emotions. He is constantly trying to curry favor, to be the good boy who is crowned with father's approval, to at least remain, in so far as the tasks allotted to him allow, in Rubinstein's proximity. Separation immediately awakens in him a childish dejection, a feeling of being deserted or forgotten. Rubinstein, for his part, does not in any way evince his awareness of Tzvialeh's needs and attachment, but he is wise enough to keep him near for the better part of the story. This partly explains the strange sense of elation that characterizes Tzvialeh's attitude toward the operation as a whole and his own share in it in particular. Paradoxically, this tense, difficult day may be one of the happiest ones in his life. He realizes with much foreboding that the close relationship with Rubinstein, prescribed by the combat situation, can hardly survive the war. In a depressed moment, he imagines a future chance meeting with Rubinstein and his unknown wife amidst a city street bustling with Sabbath strollers. After a short moment of happy recognition, followed by a formal introduction to the wife and a short reference (for her benefit) to the war experiences shared with the anonymous young man, there would be no common ground left. The meeting would never lead to a sustained relationship.

Hence, Tzvialeh is aware of the fact that war, horrible as it is, also possesses a flip side of human relatedness, and that peace can be, in more ways than one, an anticlimax. As a matter of fact he dedicates much thought to the possible disappointments which the hoped-for peace may harbor. Tzvialeh hates the army and the routine of camp life disgusts and frustrates him, as he lacks the social skills...
needed to negotiate his status within a group of peers afflicted with boredom, repressed fears, and awakened lust. But peace will offer no solution; it will only throw him right back into the confusion and sense of failure that characterized his life before the war. It is only in moments of meaningful collective effort such as those described in this story that he can transcend himself. Thus Tzvialeh's fragile happiness assumes an important role in the story and strengthens the "positive" view of the war it imparts.

Gavri (a shortened version of Gabriel, but the name, thus shortened, also means "manly" "virile" in Hebrew) is the aleon, the braggart of the story, the antagonist against whom the Yizhar protagonists often measure themselves. Here like elsewhere he is the robust, heavily mustached and kaffiyah-adorned seasoned soldier, who has been everywhere, knows everybody, and regards himself as supremely savvy in all military matters (predictably he would have planned the entire operation in an altogether different way). Habituately, and here too, the Yizhar protagonist recoils from this character, his attitude is a mixture of genuine disgust mingled with a sense of inferiority and insignificance. However, in Midnight Convoy the repulsion is considerably minimized and softened, allowing Tzvialeh to confront his well repressed admiration for the dashing courage, resourcefulness, and social ease of the Gavris, without whom the war could not have been fought. For it is Gavri, of course, who is sent by Rubinstein on the fairly dangerous mission of reconnoitering the Egyptian outpost, and, if possible, also mining the path leading from the outpost to the road; and Gavri, together with the soldiers he leads, successfully carries out both parts of his task.

Here, Yizhar comes as close as he ever does in his early, pre-memoiristic fiction, to uncovering the hidden identity of the Gavri-like characters in his stories, which, starting in A Story That Did Not Start but achieving full sweep only in the author's late novels, such as the autobiographical Preliminaries, is revealed to be none other than that of his dashing, handsome and easy-going elder brother, who both in life and in his premature death in a motorcycle accident was given all the love, pride, and heartbreak of his elderly father, as well as the admiration, love and hatred of his jealous younger brother. Like Esau in the biblical story this brother's portrayal was necessarily fraught with ambiguity. In most of his early stories Yizhar had to project this sibling-figure in essentially negative guises—an indication of the intensity of the pain inflicted by festering sibling rivalry. However, in Midnight Convoy this pain is considerably assuaged, and the Gavri character is therefore portrayed in a somewhat more balanced and positive manner than in most cases.

Dali (shortened version of Dalia) is the girl operating the wireless system, and we are told absolutely nothing about her. Even her face is never really seen, as she arrives at night, and remains shrouded by darkness for the duration of the story. Only the green or red eye of the apparatus she operates occasionally allows for a glimpse, revealing a contour, illuminating the movement of a hand pushing aside the long hair that falls on her face. Though her voice is heard, it is intentionally the mechanical voice used for transmitting short coded messages by wireless. The few words that Tzvialeh manages to exchange with her after much hesitation and ridiculously complex preparations are mundane, matter of fact, and desultory. They do not reveal any aspect of her character or temper. And yet it is Dali more than anyone else who dominates Tzvialeh's interior monologue. Nothing is more indicative of his emotional immaturity, for it is exactly the anonymity and inaccessibility of the girl that renders her the ideal focus of his adolescent eroticism. What Tzvialeh seeks is not a real encounter with an approachable woman but rather the repetitious wallowing in a welter of erotic fantasies, which, emotionally burgeoning as they may be, are never carried beyond a certain barrier of propriety. For instance, Tzvialeh, who is probably a member of an agricultural commune, is well aware of the way unmarried youngsters seeking erotic intimacy in these ultra-puritan little societies behaved. In the evening, after showering away the sweat of their daily toil and changing their clothes, they would walk toward the gate of the compound, pretending to enjoy an innocent evening stroll. Once beyond that portal they would find their way to the nearest grove or thick copse where they could enjoy, unperturbed, each other's company. Characteristically,
in his mind Tzvialeh repeatedly performs together with the fantasized Dali the first part of the ritual, the seemingly innocent walk in the direction of the gate. The two even arrive at the gate and actually leave the compound. However, what takes place or should have taken place once the two are left to themselves is never allowed to project itself into the young man’s thoughts. Instead of savoring—in fantasy—the joys of erotic intimacy, he begins the walk toward the gate once more, and repeats the procedure which again will be interrupted at the critical moment. Thus the meandering undulations of Tzvialeh’s stream of consciousness, made possible by the slow pace of the story, provide an ideal matrix for the hesitant eroticism that the author wishes to explore—an eroticism which perpetually approximates the point of sexual self-recognition but never dares to actually reach it.

To sum up, the desire to fully explore the various aspects of his chief protagonist was one of the considerations that brought Yizhar to choose the relatively relaxed war-time backdrop of the convoy saga for his major war novella. This exploration also necessitated the artistic mastering of the technique of the interior monologue on a scale that had not been attempted in his earlier works. Indeed, Midnight Convoy can be regarded as the author’s most elaborate and accomplished work written in the tradition of stream of consciousness fiction before the monumental Days of Ziklag. It is permeated with an intense use of the stream of consciousness narrative modalities and devices, focusing especially on the exploration of character.

However, in and of itself, this exploration, tender and protracted as it is, is not the most significant component in the story’s texture and structure. All the considerations I have explicated, whether related to theme, style, or character, are perhaps subsidiary to another, overriding concern. The novella, evolving as a story in which fear, sacrifice, and desolation do not undermine the lyrical beauty of landscapes, the innocent eroticism of the protagonist, the hopeful attitude of a young nation and of a young man, who, at least to some extent, temporarily transcends his loneliness and sense of marginality, invites the reader to a particular kind of reading—an ideal reading, as far as Yizhar was concerned: what he called a “musical” reading.

Yizhar always believed that prose-fiction, not poetry, was the verbal art that could most radically approximate music—in his eyes the ideal art form—due to three salient characteristics: first, its being, like music, an art form based on continuity in time rather than in space; second, its use of both polyphony and counterpoint; and third, its relative freedom, which allows for “musical” procedures such as repetition, variation, sonata-like juxtaposition of multiple themes that are developed separately yet intricately intertwined, and large-scale “symphonic” orchestration of themes, tempi, rhythms and instruments of various tonal qualities (such as the use of different styles, of words hewn from different historical layers of the language, of different syntactical formations, of colorful and diverse euphonies, of monologue, dialogue, interior monologue, essayistic discourse, and so on). More than once Yizhar declared that a page of a well written novel or story should be looked at as a musical score (a “partitura”), and that plot and structure in the novel should be analyzed in terms of musical movements rather than architectural components.

Midnight Convoy: if it is to be read at all, must be read musically. The impatient reader who seeks the excitement of an action-filled plot will have no use for it. It is targeted at a reader who is willing to yield himself to the flow of the text which within the general framework of a very slowly evolving plot, freely mingles detailed descriptions of the landscape, lengthy pieces of emotional and ideational interior monologue, repetitive images (such as the foot with the Dunlop sandal), variations (such as the fantasized walk to the gate together with the idealized Dali), juxtapositions and counterpoint (Tzvialeh versus Gavri, for example), all of which are enveloped in the sheer acoustic brilliance of Yizhar’s richly orchestrated Hebrew. A reader who is not deterred by such self-surrender is carried along the author’s musically conceived long sequences of narration and description and experiences the novella as a symphonic whole. Rather than stopping and restarting according to the overt machinery of narrative structure, which divides the story into sharply articulated smaller units, he glides over a narrative structure well covered by soft stylistic tissues of various kinds, overlaid by a seamlessly textured surface, with no
sharp edges protruding and undermining the continuity and relaxed mobility of the reading process.

This does not imply that the story does not change registers, that it is not made to swell and recede in passages of crescendo and diminuendo. However, the reader is meant to be carried along the fluctuating tides and ebbs, following the protagonist in his confusion, hesitation, and oscillation between moments of forlornness and of warm camaraderie, to the unexpected vast upsurge toward a moment of triumphant emotional climax: the passage where Tzvialeh witnesses the marching soldiers, unassuming yet determined, devoid of military grandiosity, yet ready to meet their fate, whatever it may be. This is Yizhar’s great ode, a narrative equivalent of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” in the Ninth Symphony:

One wanted all at once to rise up before them and state one’s admiration, to praise this or that man walking his dark line, all of those unknown soldiers who kept on, whose only fear was of falling out of line—Some good word had to be found to fill the place of prayer for their survival—at least allow them to laugh, if nothing else. —And then it was clear that the best thing to do would be to join the marchers and go off with them, blessed and praised on your way to whatever fatal destination. For what is man but a gentle creature, devoid of any desire of his own for a march such as this, which he undertakes trembling with worry and want, though not rejecting the burden but hoisting it upon his back and marching on, immersed in the rhythm and the sweat, too pressed for time to think about things and their ends. Diligent, anonymous, they passed on and on, in a single file of silence, one after the other, on and on, silent men marching in line—Something which could be perceived only in a blur, as it was greater than that which ordinary words can describe (pp. 162-163).

Upon close examination one can retroactively see how this climactic paean has been carefully prepared and thoughtfully situated by the author. It is preceded by long passages of distinctly minor tonality, such as Tzvialeh’s reminiscences of life in the military camp—brutal, ugly, and socially unbearable—or the long conversation between Tzvialeh and Ya’akov, a soldier he has just met, whose honest and direct responses reassert the horrific aspects of life on the frontline, which Tzvialeh himself consistently tries to repress. In this, the only real dialogue Tzvialeh conducts in the entire story, we clearly see the difference between the immature protagonist and the much more self-aware and straightforward soldier, who confronts his corrosive fears and confesses to having developed a set of superstitions. For example, he takes the sound of a braying donkey in a distant village before battle as a sign that he will emerge unharmed from the encounter with the enemy. When such a braying fails to materialize, he says, his ears strive to transform any noise they absorb into the hoped for “music” that for him is somehow connected with ideas of peace and normalcy, even as his worried heart fully knows the truth. This braying of a village donkey offers an intentionally orchestrated contrast to the Beethoven-like grand chords that follow it. And it is the donkey’s braying, not the Beethoven-like choir, which supplies the proper closing note at the story’s final paragraph; for, a master of Yizhar’s stature does not bring a story to its closure with a festive paean accompanied by blaring trumpets. Rather he slides down from this elevation, resuming the halting and low-keyed music of Tzvialeh’s alienation to produce a penultimate narrative section replete with anxiety—the possibility that the entire operation was bungled and will end in carnage and failure—and utter exhaustion, and finally arriving at a moment of renewed but restrained hope, a call for a refreshed and re-attuned receptivity to the wondrous reality of space and time: “And now you, son of man, pay heed to these hills, let your gaze extend till the very boundaries of the skies and the further expanses, until the limits of all life in this night world—do you not hear the donkey’s call, call of peace?” (pp. 204-205). Having reached this point the reader experiences the musical satisfaction following the final symphonic chords, harmonizing all discords and offering a genuine moment of tonal closure.