

Literature by Leon I. Yudkin

Ke-yamim Ahadim (As a Few Days). By Meir Shalev. Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1994. 334pp.

More and more, there is a tendency within the newly-established mainstream of Israeli fiction to take a long, backward look at the sources of the Hebrew settlement in *Eretz Israel* in the twentieth century. The counterpart of the *shtetl* tradition of Mendele and Agnon, the new Hebrew writers were represented by such as Yizhar, Tammuz, Knaz, Tsalka and Ben-Ner. Israeli introspection and self-investigation may account not only for the prevalence of this tendency, but for the current huge popularity of Meir Shalev. This is his third major novel, following *Roman Rusi* and *Eysav*, that brings to the fictional account of the *yishuv* a rich folkloristic imagination, vibrant language and an unrelenting affection for the personalities involved.

The narrative of *As a Few Days* revolves around the account of Yudit, her three men, one of whom was her husband, as presented by another of the men, and the first person presenter, Yudit's son, Zeide. Zeide (grandfather in Yiddish), is claimed by all three of Yudit's lovers, and he allows his mother's story to unfold, from her unorthodox arrival in the village to the moment of her tragic death by a peculiar accident of nature. The child is born in 1940, but his life has both narrative antecedents in the novel and a position beyond.

The atmosphere of the novel is pervaded by the feel of the village, the farm, the animals, human eccentricity, and, despite what is after all a fairly short history by standards of international memories, a sense of time immemorial. The primary narrator shifts backward and forward in his attempt to allow the three 'fathers' to offer their own impassioned and colourful account of the fascinating and mysterious woman who will never reveal the true identity of Zeide's father. This naturally ensures that all three hold equal stake both in Yudit and in the child. Thus, the child has, in practice, three fathers. His name, in fact, is designed to repel the angel of death, even from the moment of entry into the world. The mother's presence is constant, and the child, born in a manger, recalls another famous historical moment. Altogether, the story takes on dimensions of myth, whilst remaining true to the lineaments of Israeli history.

Shalev's narrative and linguistic capacity are extraordinary, although unfortunately the book is overlong and sometimes tiresomely repetitive. A new and excitingly distinctive voice is now being heard in Israeli fiction.

Layish (Laish). By Aharon Appelfeld. Jerusalem, Keter, 1994. 192pp.

Appelfeld's fiction has become increasingly concerned with Jewish marginality outside of Israel. His subject hitherto has been the precariousness of the individual, the illusion of security in a gentile environment, the aspiration to assimilation within Europe, and then, within the post-Holocaust era, the fixation of the survivors and their frozen immobility. The author recently explored the false promise held out by conversion in the novel, *Timyon*, and here, the inarticulate longings of a band of wanderers.

The narrator of this novel is a 15-year-old orphan, who attaches himself to a band on its way in a caravan to *Eretz Israel*. However, the way is none too direct,

fraught with difficulties, obstacles and conflict. Finghurt, for example, the lad's old, sick and rich employer, regards the journey to Jerusalem as an exercise in self-deception. The reader in fact may be left uncertain as to whether we are talking about the earthly Jerusalem or its heavenly counterpart. In any case, the narrator pledges his undying loyalty, and inherits the function made over to him by his boss to record everyone's date of death. He does this too for Finghurt himself.

The pilgrims proceed painfully on their weary way, delayed by insalubrious business in Czernowitz, clinging to the river Prut. These constitute a species of Jewish gipsy, not belonging anywhere, on the fringes of all societies, and deriving legitimacy from a goal that is always tantalizingly beyond the horizon.

Is the Jewish State a metaphor, encapsulating a Messianic dream, and necessarily remaining so? The characters in the convoy constitute a disparate crew, some of them beaten, sick, the underbelly of a hostile environment. There is the constant presence of the falcon, the bird of prey, apparently waiting for death; but there is also vivifying hope. And just when we might have come to terms with the assumption that rather than attain the object, the band might be revolving in its own groove, they arrive at the port. So the Holy Land now takes on an earthly reality.

Appelfeld is the Hebrew novelist of the diaspora par excellence, a diaspora that can exist even with the presence of Israel, and even within Israel, because it is of the diaspora within the modern Jew, a condition rather than a location. Shadowy realism and dream mingle in this haunting and intangible narrative.

Hazirim (Boars). By Israel Ha-meiri. Jerusalem, Keter, 1994. 150pp.

Ha-meiri, born in kibbutz Givat Haim in 1948, has now written some half dozen novels and volumes of short stories, as well as plays and criticism. His composition is stark and precise, eschewing overt emotionalism or narrative bias. The narrator, whether first or third person, presents the bare bones of a minimalist narrative, leaving the reader to fill in the homiletic lacunae and to amplify the fine lines of the text.

The stories in this volume are primarily of Israeli life, inhabited by Israeli characters even when set beyond Israel's borders, and so present an Israeli perspective of ordinary life. Emotion, however strong, is hinted at rather than accentuated. Dialogue is prominent, but, as in dramatic work, the spectator does not need to have everything spelt out in words, as he can see for himself what is going on. This does, of course, make for difficulties of comprehension. The reader becomes party to the act of interpretation.

The author aims at psychological penetration into repressed material. The past constantly invades the present, and shapes it. The sentences are short, the language simple and demotic, representing common levels of Israeli speech. The younger generation is usually laconic, even monosyllabic, expressing the testy nature of those abused but over-indulged. The life presented is unadorned and often violent. We have seen in earlier work by the author how the stark nature of contemporary reality may be relieved by drugs. In these stories, the gaps are wider and the conclusions unarticulated.

The tendency evinced here is far from the expressive reflectiveness of Amos Oz, as it is from the inventiveness of A.B. Yehoshua and the portraits of alienation from the environment found in Aharon Appelfeld, the verbal

indulgences of S. Yizhar and the surrealistic humour of such as Orly Castel-Bloom. The writing is sparse, but suggestive and powerful.

Maagalim Mudpasim (Printed Circuits). By Avner Shats. Jerusalem, Keter, 1994. 170pp.

This, the first published volume of a new, young writer, comprises a collection of stories, anecdotes and notes, presented in a multi-faceted form and in various designs. Humour is not the most prevalent characteristic of Israeli fiction, so this hearty and full-blooded explosion of mirth should be welcomed both for its fancy and its invention.

This is a volume more of literary games than of stories, self-referential and playful. The fictions are fantastic, removed, but not too far, from the naturalistic everyday. According to the sub-headings, there are 'six demographic stories' and some 'printed circuits', which comprise the total volume. These two aspects represent the imagination extended into the dream world, on the one hand, and the word patterned game on the page, on the other. We may imagine a world populated exclusively by males, although this nightmare vision can still pattern the inevitable hand of humanity with this scenario. And an alternative reality is also invoked, where the females remain the sole inhabitants of an island, and where such males as happen within range are imprisoned and enslaved.

Otherwise, we have language games, playing on the meaning of words, whilst self-consciously observing the act of play. There is abstract writing, contriving geometric patterns. We also have something that has become very familiar in current Israeli fiction, parallel narratives or text and commentary, constituting thus an explicit hyper-text. The author disarms potential criticism both by articulating it himself and by commenting on the articulation.

Altogether, the post-modernist thrust is relieved by a proportionate irony, and brings the reader back to a consideration both of the meaning of fiction and of our perception of that meaning. We not only have fiction bordering on speculative prose, but also the groundwork for criticism. Both the initial creation and the analysis of the material are balanced and reviewed, although no conclusions are drawn.