

ONE OF THE first and, by now, classic confrontations between Arab and Jew in modern Hebrew literature is depicted in a short vignette by Yosef Hayyim Brenner. His rhetoric of "despair" and "no choice" sums up his basic-human-rights philosophy for the Jewish settlement in Eretz Yisrael, a philosophy which presumes to move beyond conventional systems of social thought and action (much the same as the notion of non-violence has done in recent times), in order to project a deeply moralistic, even spiritual tenor of unequivocal justice. In this sense, the young Arab boy is a symbol of all downtrodden peoples whose inalienable rights have been abrogated; and Brenner's declaration of responsibility to and mutuality with this symbolic figure of the Arab bespeaks his view of the plight of the Jew at that time. Identification, not tolerance, is the issue; Arab and Jew are brothers, not enemies; they are united, in Brenner's egalitarian vision, by common human needs and goals. Brenner's death at the hand of Arab marauders in Jaffa—only a few weeks after this sketch was written—is certainly a terribly tragic irony of history.² His symbolic perspective stands, however, as a keynote journalistic piece in the annals of modern Hebrew literature's treatment of the Arab. Most later writers who offered fictional portraits of Arab figures followed Brenner's example by projecting through these images central aspects of their own self-views, aspects of their own feelings and experiences in pre- and post-1948 Israel. In the early decades of the century, much of the literature depicting Arabs consisted of a folkloristic or local-color type of fiction. In the "Arab" stories of Smilansky (1874–1953) and the collected works of Shami (1889–1949), for example, the reader is presented with varied, quasi-ethnological portrayals of Arab life: their customs, tribal ceremonies, rivalries, foods, love relationships.³ Generally this genre of literature depicts Arab society as a self-contained world, with little or no intrusion by alien outsiders; it is akin to the glimpses of inner, native life rendered by Cooper and Kipling in Nineteenth Century fiction. The central issues are Arab displacement from their land and property, the victimization of innocent villagers by forces beyond their control, and the agonized feelings of loss in terms of personal relations or possibilities of peace. He saw himself as a pioneer, actively fulfilling A. D. Gordon's notions of the return to and unity with nature, the soulful, "religious" immersion in toil, the cosmic repair and regeneration of Jewish roots in new, healthy soil. The Bedouin thus represented for the Jew in the Palestinian Mandate period wishful possibilities of his own self-renewal as a deghettoized, liberated, natural human being. Another prominent theme in this Arab-oriented literature is the love affair. Here, too, certain motifs parallel those already current in contemporary Hebrew fiction about Jewish love experiences. For example, Smilansky's story about a Sheikh's daughter,⁶ promised against her will to someone she does not love, parallels similar depictions of misguided matches in stories by M. Y. Berdyczewski and Y. Steinberg. Steinberg's "Arab"⁷ bears an especially close resemblance to the Smilansky story, since it tells the tragic tale of a Rabbi's daughter. These vicarious notions of "naturalness" and "rootedness" seem to have attracted the Hebrew writers to the nomad as a central character.⁴ Beyond these factors, the Bedouin also may have represented a figure parallel to the Jewish watchmen (Shomrim): a gallant, swashbuckling horseman, the epitome of the dashing, romantic hero. The Bedouin was the Eastern version, it may be said, of a combined cowboy-Indian chief persona. (Hollywood's depiction of Valentino as "The Sheik" combines several of these highly romanticized ingredients.) Both the Bedouin tribesmen and the Shomer were thus figments of a frontier

society imagination. the secret love affair between Gideon and Hamada is reminiscent or similar "strange loves" in earlier fiction by Berdyczewski and HazaL. Predominant in these works is the notion of taboo: love for the outsider eventually meets with downfall and despair in a romantic, psychological sense, if not in socio-cultural terms.⁹ The first generation of Israeli writers—among them S. Yizhar, B. Tammuz, M. Shamir, and A. Megged—produced a number of short stories about Arabs.¹⁰ For the most part, these stories reflect issues of concern with regard to the "Arab problem" in the newly-founded Jewish state. Coldly, he said: "The food is ready. Go and eat in God's name. This genre of literature appears to be fairly naive. (Perhaps changing tastes on the part of a readership removed from the particular milieu described in the fiction have accentuated an already apparent quaintness.) The "noble savage" figure of the Arab, however, overcame this naivete by projecting a vital, romantic model for the "new Jew" in Eretz Yisrael. One of the best known stories of this generation is "hasfabuy" by S. Yizhar.¹¹ Once again the central Arab figure is a Bedouin, a shepherd who, though merely an innocent bystander, is taken captive by an Israeli patrol during the 1948–49 War of Independence. The narrator's view of the platoon commander is blatantly sardonic; he seems impelled to take "some action," to accomplish "something concrete" no matter how inane or trivial. She twitched her muscles, distended her nostrils, tossed her mane and stamped. My young brother! he wondered.