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SHADING THE TRUTH:
A. B. YEHOShUA’S “FACING THE FORESTS”
— Gilead Morag —

Avraham B. Yehoshua’s novella, “Facing the Forests,” has become one of the best-known and widely discussed stories in modern Israeli literature.\(^1\) It tells of an Israeli forest watchman who discovers that the ruins of an Arab village are buried under the trees of the forest he is charged with protecting. He encourages the mute old Arab who lives there to set the forest on fire and rejoices when the trees burn down and the contours of the buried village reemerge. Not surprisingly, “Facing the Forests” has customarily been read as an early narrative effort to expose the deep sense of guilt underlying the refusal of Israelis to recognize their complicity in decimating the previous Arab presence in the land. In his monumental study of Hebrew narrative fiction, Gershon Shaked writes that “the publication of this story in 1963 had a shocking effect on its intended readers because the materials of the story cohere into a message that its readers had repressed. They now see that, according to Yehoshua, the mute Arabs inhabit the subconscious of Israeli society and are subverting it from within; that its intellectuals are consumed with guilt and anxiety.”\(^2\)

Ehud Ben-Ezer, Nurith Gertz, Bernard Horn, and Yochai Oppenheimer offer similar readings, all of which are based on the fact that the burning of the forest is preceded by the protagonist’s discovery that it had been planted over the ruins of an Arab village that had been captured by the Israelis during their War of Independence and later demolished and covered over with new plantings.\(^3\) Until this moment of

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3 Ehud Ben-Ezer, “Portsim unetsurim” (“Besieged Conquerors”), Keshet 4 (Summer 1968): 149; Nurith Gertz, Ḥirbet ḥiz’ah veḥaboqer shelemoharat (Generation
discovery, the old Arab had maintained a deliberate distance from the watchman and was sullenly impervious to his efforts to communicate. But all this changes when the watchman comes down from his post and attempts to verify his discovery with the Arab. He wakes him up and repeats the name of the village over and over again:

The Arab hears and immediately understands. A faint expression of surprise, of wonder, and of affinity flows in the creases of his face. He jumps up... extends a heavy arm toward the window and points enthusiastically, desperately, at the forest. (113-14; 220)4

The watchman's recognition of the existence of his village diminishes the Arab's hostility and draws the two of them more closely together. When the watchman's aging lover comes down from Jerusalem to visit him in the forest, which he has come to regard as his "green domain," it quickly becomes evident that he no longer has much in common with the world that she represents. When he accompanies her back to the road and she departs, the Arab suddenly appears at his side and "together, in silence, they return to the forest, which is their domain alone" (120; 227). At this moment of quiet kinship and sense of shared domain, the watchman reveals that he had discovered the Arab's secret hoard of kerosene. He leads him there and, to the Arab's great amazement, lights a small fire and pours some of the kerosene on it. A strong flame bursts forth. "The Arab watches him, his eyes flashing madness and hope" (120; 227). For a moment, the watchman is tempted to walk away and let the fire spread. But he does not. He lets the fire burn low and, to the Arab's great disappointment, carefully stamps it out. "This was only a lesson," he says to himself. But after that the watchman starts neglecting his duties. The old

4 A. B. Yehoshua, "Facing the Forests," Keshet 5 (19) (1963), was included in Yehoshua's second collection of short stories, Mul haye'arot (Facing the Forests) (1968). For this study, I used the more readily available edition of Yehoshua's collected stories, Kol hasippurim (All the Stories) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1993). Parenthetical page references in the text will be to this volume, followed by a reference to its English translation by Miriam Arad in A. B. Yehoshua, The Continuing Silence of a Poet: Collected Stories (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998). For purposes of greater accuracy I found it necessary to provide my own translations. Consequently, the quotes given in this article will differ from the text of the published English translation.
Arab becomes more attached to him and often ties his young daughter to
the watchman’s chair so she can keep watch instead. Their relationship
becomes almost familial:

From now on, the Arab doesn’t let go of him. The three of them sit
together—one family—in the upper room. The watchman stretched out
on the bed, the girl tied to the chair, and the Arab squatting on the floor.
Waiting together for the missing fire. (122; 230)

The fire eventually comes and gives rise to the readings I have cited.
But almost all of these readings, as well as other readings offered by
Hannan Hever, Menachem Perry, Gila Ramras-Rauch, and Mordechai
Shalev, overlook the crucial fact that after his painstaking recovery of the
memory of the destroyed village and his celebratory collaboration with
the Arab in burning the forest, the protagonist, who represents the intel-
lectual elite to which the critics themselves belong, ends up betraying the
Arab he had befriended. And all of them overlook the fact that this pro-
tagontist ultimately ends up denying any knowledge of the existence of
the village he had discovered.

As the story approaches closure, the watchman suddenly “pretends
not to understand. There was a village here? He can see nothing but
trees” (121; 229). And later, as the watchman prepares to leave the forest
and the Arab, who has become convinced that only he can understand
him, desperately tries to tell him what so urgently needs to be told, the
watchman persists in his refusal to acknowledge what is being said:

[The Arab] grabs him with his strong hands ... places him on the edge
of the observation post and explains everything that can be explained
with a missing tongue.... He believes that only the watchman can
understand him. His eyes blaze. But the watchman is calm, indifferent,
shading his forehead with his hand, shrugging his shoulders, smiling
vaguely. (122; 230)

This sudden reversal at the conclusion of the novella is a narrative move
that clearly has significance. Yet this move has been consistently over-
looked by the story’s most sophisticated readers. Such collective oversight
invites speculation on the discursive constraints of the critical community

5 Hever, “Minority Discourse,” 129–47; Gila Ramras-Rauch, The Arab in Israeli
Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 129–40; Mordechai
Shalev, “Ha’aravim kepitaron sifriti” [“The Arabs As a Literary Solution”],
Haaretz Literary Supplement (September 30, 1970).

6 Hever, “Minority Discourse,” 143, is the single exception to this.
that has engaged "Facing the Forests," especially since this community may actually be one of the subjects of this work.

There is an almost complete critical consensus that "Facing the Forests" constitutes an assault on the dominant national narrative in Israel. And this is true. However, an examination of the signifying function of the overlooked events that I mentioned will show that, in challenging the validity of the conventional Zionist narrative, "Facing the Forests" also uncovers the risks inherent in mounting such a challenge. Abandoning convention in the quest for truth may yield discoveries that are unpalatable. Acknowledging the implications of such discoveries requires a level of integrity and courage that the discoverers do not always have. In the story, the watchman gradually comes to acknowledge the facts of Arab dispossession by his fellow Israelis and to despise those who would deny these facts. But his own moral courage is put to the test when these discoveries encroach on closely guarded cultural taboos and compromise his most cherished communal convictions. The manner in which the watchman fails this test may be read as a reflection of the manner in which an emergent cultural narrative that invalidates the dominant discourse may replace it with a new story that is equally flawed.

The story's nameless protagonist is an enervated young man on the fringes of the Jerusalem academic community who has long completed all his course work but seems incapable of the discipline needed to write the final thesis that will enable him to graduate and catch up with his friends who are already pursuing respectable careers. His friends arrange a job for him as a forest watchman, believing that the solitude of the forest and the undemanding task of watching for fires will enable him to write his thesis. They even choose a topic for him: the Crusades. The topic appeals to him primarily because he is convinced that hidden within it is a "dark matter" (inyan afel) that will astound him and with which he will astound others (106; 211). It is important to remember this reference to an astounding "dark matter" because it will recur at a critical narrative juncture.

"Facing the Forests" is a symbolic story that actually concludes with a specific invitation to thematic interpretation. As he emerges from the burned forest, the watchman is subjected to a police interrogation that can be read as a sly satire on the sad state of academic research:

They sit him down on a rock and cross-examine him for hours. This surprises him: the persistence, the deliberateness, the diligence. Pages piling on top of pages. A real research project taking shape before his eyes... The investigators push their subject against the rock, repeating questions that had been asked. The burned forest exudes a foul smell, as
if a giant carcass was putrefying around them. The interrogation intensifies. How boring. What did he see? What did he hear? What did he do? It's insulting, this utter dependence on the senses. As if they were what is important. As if there was no idea hidden here. (126; 234–35)

This admonition to go beyond the story's surface details of action and perception and seek out the idea they embody gains additional significance when we recall that the protagonist is sent out into the forest by his academic friends with the expectation that he will come up with some stunning new idea. And the critique of the intellectual community that controls the currency of ideas is amplified by the fact that he is told that this new idea does not necessarily need to be true, as long as it is sufficiently impressive: "What is important," he is told, "is that he bring back from the forests some astounding scientific idea. His friends will find a way to justify it" (102; 207).

The tension between the kind of self-serving idea that his friends expect him to construct and the kind of idea he actually moves toward discovering drives much of the story's narrative and serves to bind the various components of its signifying structure. "Facing the Forests" is not an allegorical story where all the parts fit into a preconceived ideological schema, but a symbolic exploration of the contradictory impulses and elusive moves of a psyche that is impelled to confront truths that it is determined to deny. This accounts for the elusiveness of many of the story's passages and for the ambiguities that constantly threaten to destabilize the narrative. But these uncertainties and contradictions are more thematic than they are structural, and the structure of the novella actually works to shape them into an experience from which a new idea may indeed emerge.

As Hillel Barzel wisely observed many years ago, "It is not the burning forests that are important but rather what is symbolized by them." There is ample textual and structural evidence in "Facing the Forests" to indicate that the novella's central trope, the forest, does not represent the physical Land of Israel or the political State of Israel, but rather it symbolizes the story of the State on the Land. In other words, the forest is a metaphoric embodiment of Israel's national narrative, of its history. And history, as we now all know, is the story that a culture tells itself about itself and struggles to preserve and defend against competing stories. It is the culturally sanctioned version of national memory. And one of the striking things about "Facing the Forests" is the manner in which it

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anticipates what postcolonial critics were later to demonstrate: that every national memory entails national forgetting.\footnote{Laurence J. Silberstein, \textit{The Postzionism Debates} (New York: Routledge, 1999), 147.}

The story’s protagonist is a member of the intellectual elite that is expected to expound the national narrative and maintain it intact. He is training to be a historian, but he cannot pursue his discipline because the words available to him have lost their ability to convey authentic meaning. “Words fatigue him; even his own words, let alone those of others” (99; 203). The discursive means at his disposal cannot serve his intellectual and spiritual needs. And this may well be the cause of his intellectual paralysis and spiritual malaise.

On one important level “Facing the Forests” is a story about the emotional and psychological struggle involved in the effort to go beyond the confines of the dominant discourse and get to the true essence of things. The protagonist seeks solitude in the hope of gaining a new perspective on language and thus alleviating his perpetual state of mental fatigue. Once in the forest, his ultimate desire is to “skip the words and get to the essence” (113; 219). He is a person who aspires to truth but whose world of discourse prohibits him from pursuing it. In this respect he is both related and juxtaposed to the old Arab who lives and works in the forest. This Arab knows forbidden truths but cannot express them because he has no tongue.

Upon encountering the Arab for the first time, the protagonist says: “The old Arab turned out to be mute. His tongue was cut out in the war. By them or by us. Does it matter?” (105; 210). This is one of the most peculiar and most telling passages in the story. How can it not matter? In terms of the concerns that are thematized in “Facing the Forests” it should matter greatly who committed this atrocity. If it was them, this would validate the national narrative of Arab savagery and inherent immorality. But if it was us, this would refute the narrative of moral conquest and purity of arms. The encounter with the tongueless Arab is a perfect opportunity for incisive historical inquiry. The fact that the watchman dismisses the moral implications of the Arab’s condition and chooses to ignore it is relevant to subsequent narrative developments. Central to these developments is his discovery that, contrary to what he was taught to believe, a destroyed Arab village is buried beneath the forest he has been assigned to protect.

The discovery of the buried village solidifies the watchman’s sense that the official version of national memory he has been charged with preserving is fabricated and false. Consequently, he becomes less
interested in the forest than in what it has been covering up. He deviates from his original scholarly project on the distant past and attempts to recover more recent occurrences that have had an impact on the present. He often leaves his high observation post and wanders about the forest to see whether he can recover traces of the life that was destroyed and buried beneath the trees. This new focus endows him with a capacity for clearer vision, for seeing things that were always there but that he had never noticed before: “Chunks of masonry are strewn among the trees, shadows of houses, remnants of ruins. He looks for traces of people” (117; 224). He also works on a new map of the area, which will include the erased village.

The distance the watchman has traveled and the transformation that occurred within him are accentuated by the visit of his lover from the city. An emissary from the world of thought from which he is becoming increasingly alienated, the woman tells him that she has been sent to bring him back because her husband and his friends are becoming concerned. They are “afraid that he is hoarding a secret over here, some astounding idea. That he will jump ahead of them with his new research,” to which he responds: “A new idea? Perhaps. But not like they think... Not exactly scientific... More human...” (119; 226). The watchman’s stay in the forest has resulted in the discovery of an astounding new idea, but of a totally unexpected kind. Not an ingenious contribution to the prevailing discursive formations, but a moral perception of the humanity that is shared with those whose existence and value have been denied by these formations. This is intimated when the watchman’s bewildered lover takes her abrupt leave and the Arab, ever vigilant, suddenly appears with the hat she left behind. He and the watchman share a playful moment on the side of the road, and then, “together, in silence, they return to the forest, which is their domain alone” (120, 227).

The growing intimacy and increased capacity for communication between the watchman and the Arab culminate at the point in which the Arab accompanies the watchman to the house where he now lives:

Here the Arab explains something with hurried and confused gestures, mumbling with his amputated tongue, rolling his head, wanting to say that this is his house and that there used to be a village here, and they just hid everything, buried it all in the big forest. (121; 229)

It is at this point that Yehoshua makes his startling narrative move. After coming all this way toward recognizing the failings of his national narrative and accepting the alternative perspective of the Arab, the watchman suddenly denies what he has learned and reverts back to the official view: “He pretends not to understand. There was a village here? He can
see nothing but trees” (121; 229). And later, as we have seen, when the Arab desperately tries to reiterate his story, the watchman persists in his refusal to acknowledge what is being said:

[The Arab] grabs him with his strong hands ... places him on the edge of the observation post and explains everything that can be explained with a missing tongue.... He believes that only the watchman can understand him. His eyes blaze. But the watchman is calm, disinterested; shading his forehead with his hand, shrugging his shoulders, smiling vaguely. What else can he do after such loss? (122; 230)

In quoting this passage again, I have included an additional short sentence, both because it contains a kernel of explanation for the watchman’s conduct and because it demonstrates the technique of contiguous signification that is used throughout this work. This is a narrative strategy in which the adjacent positioning of seemingly disparate tropes illuminates the causes or meanings of critical narrative moves. Here the discordant trope is, “What else can he do after such loss?” which is the best I could do with the difficult-to-translate Hebrew original, “mah notar lo be’onyo” (“What does he have left in his impoverishment?”). How does this phrase fit in? Clearly it is offered as an explanation for the watchman’s refusal to acknowledge the truth he has learned. But what has impoverished the watchman, and why has it caused him to deny all he has attained? To understand this, we need to go back to the original turning point, examine it in its entirety, and see how contiguity creates signification:

Here the Arab explains something with rapid and confused hand gestures, mumbling with his amputated tongue, rolling his head, wanting to say that this is his house and that there used to be a village here, and they just hid everything, buried it all in the big forest.

The watchman watches the display of gestures, and his heart fills with joy. What is it that is exciting the Arab so much? Apparently his wives were also murdered here. Evidently a dark matter. He walks forward slowly, pretends not to understand. There was a village here? He can see nothing but trees. (121–22; 229)

Having gained the trust of the Arab and established the capacity to communicate with him, the story that he learns confirms the truths that the watchman has already been able to confront: that he is living in the Arab’s house, that there had been an Arab settlement here, and that the forest constitutes a deliberate effort to hide these truths. Confirming all this fills the watchman with the joy of affirmation and vindication: “The watchman watches the display of gestures, and his heart fills with joy.”
But there is more. Something else is stirring the Arab. Another revelation emerges: not only was his house confiscated, his village destroyed, and the record of all this obliterated; there were atrocities too—his wives were murdered. "The watchman watches the display of gestures, and his heart fills with joy. What is it that is exciting the Arab so much? Apparently his wives were also murdered here. Evidently a dark matter."

Up to this point there was nothing particularly new in what the watchman had discovered. Destruction and dispossession were truths that lay in the consciousness of Israelis, even though they may have tried to suppress and ignore them. But the possibility of atrocity is an encroachment on a powerful taboo that protects the belief in the absolute purity of Israeli arms and in the absolute moral superiority of the Israelis over their Arab foes. Breaching this taboo is intolerable to the watchman, who, as we recall, actually set out to discover some "dark matter." But when he finally makes his discovery, he realizes that it has nothing to do with the Crusaders, but with his own people. And he cannot accept what he has found. His quest for truth has gone farther than he was prepared to travel and taken him to a heart of darkness he cannot confront. And this is what causes his absolute retreat, even from what he had already acknowledged:

The watchman watches the display of gestures, and his heart fills with joy. What is it that is exciting the Arab so much? Apparently his wives were also murdered here. Evidently a dark matter. He walks forward slowly, pretends not to understand. There was a village here? He can see nothing but trees. (121–22; 229)

Ultimately, I think, this story is an exploration of how much reality we are willing to accept and a delineation of the cultural limits to the ability to confront the full dimensions of truth. It also intimates the consequences of these cultural constraints. It is only after the watchman refuses to acknowledge his story that the Arab burns the forest and forces the truth that it had been hiding to emerge:

The watchman looks toward the five smoking hills, narrows his eyes, and then, out of the smoke, ... the little village emerges; resurrected in outline as in an abstract painting, like every other buried past. (124; 233)

But the Israeli authorities who arrive on the scene appear oblivious to what has been revealed, just as they seem to be incapable of understanding the meaning of what the watchman is trying to tell them. This is where he loses patience with the investigation:

The interrogation intensifies. How boring. What did he see? What did he hear? What did he do? It's insulting, this utter dependence on the senses.
As if they were what is important. As if there was no idea hidden here. 

(126; 234–35)

We are not told what the watchman has been saying to the investigators. But it appears that, much like the author of this story, he has been trying to convey an aspect of truth that his audience is unable to accept. So the relentless interrogation continues until finally, furious, frustrated, and fatigued, he breaks down, changes his story, and tells them what they want to hear: a version of the story that they already know and can readily accept:

He begins to contradict himself. At three o’clock he breaks in their hands like a twig. He is prepared to offer the Arab as a possible solution. This, of course, is the hint they had been waiting for. They had suspected the Arab from the start. They immediately handcuff him. Suddenly everything ends in a hurry. The police cars come to life. They quickly load the Arab into one of the cars. But there is joy in his eyes and a sense of valor. (126; 235)

The Arab’s regained dignity and pride is very different from the deep sense of guilt, futility, and shame with which the watchman returns to the city, haunted by a knowledge he cannot convey and shunned by his friends who are afraid of what he may have learned and might ultimately say.

Having reached this point in my reading, I found myself wondering whether this richly imagined and intricately crafted work is also a courageous one. Because, much like its protagonist, “Facing the Forests” breaches a formidable cultural taboo but does little to communicate what lies behind it. Still trapped in the discursive confines of the world they live in, both the author and his protagonist seem unable to give their discoveries full voice. The dark truth is buried as deeply in the subtext of the story as it is in the subconscious of its protagonist and of the community he has come to represent. This may help explain why numerous studies by critics who are part of this community have glossed over this critical point. But it is also important to remember that this work was written some three decades before Israel’s “new historians” legitimated such interrogations of the national narrative and arrived at very similar conclusions. And I, myself, am among the critics who did not see these things the first time I studied this story and in several subsequent readings. I am sure that the reading that I am offering now would not have been possible without what I have learned from the teachings of postmodernism and the varieties of cultural criticism. The true wonder is that this work could be written long before these lessons were around.