

PREFACE

I have known A. B. Yehoshua (“Boolie”) for nearly half my life; over the years he has become almost like a father figure with whom one can argue, laugh, and commiserate. Although, in this age of iconoclastic critiques, such an avowal is hardly the best way to open a critical analysis of a major author’s oeuvre, I hope that the chapters ahead can demonstrate that even friendship and admiration for an author may generate an independent critique, as testified by the work of several other fellow scholars whom Yehoshua has also befriended.

Once, the two of us drove to Tel Aviv after a lecture that he delivered at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem. When we arrived at his destination, I flung open the cab’s door and asked his wife, Ika (ז’ל)—waiting at the curb in front of their apartment building after sending off their grandchildren, who had come there for dinner as they did every Thursday—how could she manage so well with someone so stubborn! This exasperation, likely to be recognized by anyone who has befriended Yehoshua, is invariably mixed with gratitude for his warm and down-to-earth willingness to connect, assist, and explain. Yehoshua may exasperate through his insistent pursuit of an idea—whichever happens to be foremost on his mind at any moment regarding the Jewish question in its many iterations—yet he is extraordinarily available to discuss it.

When I first met Yehoshua, I was a graduate student of comparative literature at Princeton, and he arrived there to teach Hebrew literature during a sabbatical from his regular teaching duties at the University of Haifa. I was interested at the time in characters who argue (in novels) about how to tell a story that reflects their deepest cultural and aesthetic attitudes toward truth and fiction. Yehoshua’s *Mr. Mani* (*Mar Mani*, 1990) became part of that project, along with key examples by Cervantes, Dickens, Conrad, and Austen; and from then on, some aspect of Yehoshua’s work has stayed on my desk, tempting me to go further into the world of Hebrew literature, both ancient and contemporary. I have been lucky, as well, to have an opportunity to write and teach about literary traditions that are technically much younger than Hebrew, but which have managed to benefit from a more

consistent scholarly treatment in modern times. This in turn nourishes our understanding of Yehoshua's work.

All in all, this book offers a rather eclectic analysis of major patterns and techniques that recur specifically across Yehoshua's oeuvre. To illuminate them, each chapter follows its own unique interpretative approach: chapter 2, for example, uses maps to visualize Yehoshua's worldview in relation to the geopolitical settings of his novels; chapter 3 conducts a chronotopic analysis of the watchman's stance across his oeuvre; chapter 6 unpacks the semiotic prompts behind his provocative name choices; and a Manian coda stages an impertinent conversation about Jewish identity with the author of *Mr. Mani*.

The unified argument of this book is simply a call for a more systematic appreciation of Yehoshua's multilayered imagination. To express this, he uses literary techniques that he learned primarily from Agnon and Faulkner; but his multilayered complexity answers to his own total commitment to clarify the condition of Israel at his present time. Yehoshua's style is notable, as well, for its delectable and subtle humor; but in the tradition of the novel in its heyday, he uses it to entice his readers to engage more conscientiously with what he considers to be the most urgent dilemmas facing his current national situation. Yehoshua's tendency to build his narratives on multiple layers of signification is thus a consequence of his desire to psychoanalyze the moral and practical paradoxes underlying the social and political challenges that worry him.

Ideally, Yehoshua's novels should be interpreted on at least four simultaneous levels of signification: according to the psychological troubles of his characters; with close attention to the sociopolitical tensions of individuals from diverse ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds who interact in Yehoshua's novels through their extended families and in their workplace; via the comparisons he draws between secular Israeli life in the present and historical scenarios that throw contemporary Israeli life into perspective; and finally, as part of his preoccupation with Jewish identity as shaped by longstanding historiosophic conversations that go back to ancient times, and that mix theology with legend and actual history in an entanglement that Yehoshua tries to pry apart.

Avraham Yehoshua's coming of age, his bar mitzvah during the winter of 1949 in Jerusalem, coincided with the armistice agreements that were worked out gradually between the fledgling State of Israel and its neighbors in the aftermath of Israel's Declaration of Independence. During the previous two

years, bombings, curfews, battles, and a siege plagued the city in which five generations of Yehoshuas had been raised. Thus, at a most impressionable age, Yehoshua lived through a bitter struggle for national survival and independence; and yet, it is remarkable that he rarely speaks or writes about this era in a direct manner, displacing it instead onto transmuted scenarios across his opus and ethos.

Somewhat like his character Yosef Mani—the son of a Sephardic gynecologist at the turn of the nineteenth century in a more compact Jerusalem—the childhood, boyhood, and youth of Avraham Yehoshua in Jerusalem, during the 1940s and '50s, took place between his parents' modern Sephardic household, the secular Ashkenazi learning environment that they chose for him, and the traditional milieu of his paternal grandfather, a distinguished rabbi who at one time headed the Sephardic rabbinical court. Indeed, like Yosef Mani's career, the lifework of his creator has been dedicated to defining his own national identity in relation to the needs and expectations of different types of Jews, Arabs, and foreigners, across boundaries that are more or less permeable.

Yehoshua's Yosef Mani, at the age of twelve, assists in the birth of a baby whose umbilical cord he must cut because his obstetrician father—who had run after Polish visitors, whom he had been trying to convince to stay in Jerusalem—had left his son alone with a birthing mother. At this age, too, Yehoshua had witnessed a birth—the rebirth of Israel—and part of him bitterly resents having been left holding its umbilical attachment to atavistic attitudes, such as diasporic or religious mentalities, which he regards as being both a debilitating and an enriching source of Israeli identity. As Yehoshua repeatedly declares in his public lectures and shows in his fiction, these cultural attachments cannot be dislodged from modern Israeli life without endangering its core values, and perhaps even its survival. Therefore, by every means at his disposal, he anatomizes the vestigial attachments of Jews, as well as Muslims, Christians, and pagans, paying extra attention to the mindsets of secular Israelis, whether Jews or Muslims, whose behaviors he contrasts, rather selectively, with alternative heritages—Spanish, Hindu, Sudanese, Japanese, and so forth.

In his youth, the orphaned Yosef Mani navigates among the representatives of different cultural enclaves in Jerusalem to grasp their worldviews and means of communication: he learns English from Christian clergy at the Scottish mission near the Old City, he acquires French from a family

of Algerian Jewish immigrants, he studies *torah* with a Hassidic sect in Mea Shearim, and he chats in Arabic with a sheik who had befriended his grandfather. In his youth, Yehoshua too navigated among people from a variety of European and Middle Eastern backgrounds, many of whom were making a big effort to configure themselves into a new Israeli identity. He was aware of the double pain of German Jews, who after the Holocaust became alienated from their beloved German language and culture; of *Haredi* ultraorthodox who resisted the reinvigoration of a Holy Tongue for secular affairs; and Muslim and Christian Arabs who soon began to master the nuances of Hebrew. This anxious assembly of individuals from diverse backgrounds was suddenly expected to breathe together as a coherent body with a single national identity. To understand the impediments still facing the consolidation of this modern Israeli identity has been Yehoshua's main intellectual preoccupation.

From an artistic point of view, A. B. Yehoshua's life work invites a study of repetition and variation. Certainly, important distinctions do mark the different stages of his career—from his earliest surrealist short stories, to his provocative novellas and mature novels, as well as theatrical plays, film scripts, children's books, polemical essays, and even an operatic libretto. Nevertheless, in ever surprising ways, Yehoshua reworks the themes and techniques adumbrated in his early stories and honed in his existential novellas of the 1960s into the multilayered novels that he has composed over the last four decades. This book offers a bird's-eye view of his underlying techniques and overarching themes, with special attention to the novels.

Mine is also an integrative project in respect to the vast scholarship that has been produced around the work of A. B. Yehoshua. Although broad and rich in its subject matter, this scholarship has tended to focus on an analysis of individual works, often in immediate response to their publication. I believe the time is ripe to expand this analysis of Yehoshua's individual works into a more systematic awareness of his major themes and compositional patterns.

Readers who wish to become quickly acquainted with Yehoshua's novels and worldview will find in chapter 2, "Mapping Yehoshua's Worldview," a visual synthesis of his national, global, and local settings, illustrated through ten maps prepared especially for this book to highlight his two key preoccupations: his fear that the Jewish people might find themselves again in the same vulnerable condition that Zionism aimed to correct, but then, despite

and perhaps because of this fear, his desire to push his readers—first and foremost secular Israelis—to consider alternative cultural scenarios, which put their own contemporary Israeli life into a defamiliarizing perspective. Defining Israeli identity in relation to these alternative diasporic situations across space and time as well as in relation to Israel’s constitutive cultures—the different types of Jews, Muslims, and Christians who make up the mosaic of Israeli life—is another core aspect of Yehoshua’s vocational mission.

Although Yehoshua may send his protagonists to the farthest reaches of the globe in his bid to illustrate the dangers of national dispersion, he also demonstrates—and in extraordinary detail—the benefits of interacting with people from many heritages. This paradoxical dynamic governs the composition of his global, national, and local settings. We can best observe it over the course of two centuries in *Mr. Mani*, where Yehoshua pays very careful attention to the evolving interactions between representatives of diverse ethnicities, religions, and nationalities, especially in Jerusalem, but also around the entire Mediterranean region. The principal setting of Yehoshua’s fiction is usually the State of Israel; yet even within its borders he portrays a mosaic of diverse social identities in constant interaction with one another. At the same time, he has expressed a keen frustration with Israel’s lack of clearly agreed-upon geographic borders, a theme that became particularly prominent in *The Liberated Bride* (2001).

Readers already familiar with Yehoshua’s major works and worldview may prefer to skip this introductory map chapter and go directly to chapter 3, which explores the “watchman’s stance” across his oeuvre. There, I argue that Yehoshua periodically situates his characters at panoramic outposts where their ability to evaluate the demands of the world around them can be tested. Usually located on high places, these lookout scenarios paradoxically expose the *limited* cognition and impaired eyesight of fallible individuals entrusted with important missions of national repair. Much attention has been paid to the watchman’s stance in Yehoshua’s iconic novella *Facing the Forests* (*Mul haye’arot*, 1963), but many variations of this stance recur across his fiction, to the extent that we could consider it to be his characteristic chronotope.

Several scholars have noted that in *Facing the Forests* Yehoshua employs biblical terminology to link his contemporary watchman with the prophets of yore known as “watchmen over the house of Israel.” Scripture presents the missions of these prophets-watchmen as a binding vocation assigned

to them from above. In dialogue with this biblical trope, Yehoshua teases his characters with a range of professional and familial assignments that extend, but also undermine, the biblical model of national identity and responsibility. With extraordinary care, he portrays the daily occupations of lawyers, judges, surgeons, teachers, merchants, and engineers; but then he extends their professional duties into a larger mission of national repair that they can barely keep up with. In Yehoshua's hands, the professional abilities of his characters are thus turned into a higher consideration of national responsibilities, carefully layered unto the author's here and now. The construction of this stratified multifocality is what enables Yehoshua to address questions of national identity and responsibility that acquire a heightened urgency in times of national reconfiguration or consolidation, such as Yehoshua has experienced almost incessantly during Israel's first century as a significant political player.

Conceived as a triptych, chapters 4, 5, and 6, on "Vocation," "Names," and "Holidays," showcase how Yehoshua elevates the realistic details of his fictional worlds into a more abstract intellectual discussion. He does this by creatively evoking historical events and processes, and by joining a long-standing historiosophic conversation about mythical concepts and symbols, such as the belief in supernatural redemption or a lingering nostalgia for an Edenic past. The perception of what counts as history rather than myth can indeed change—notably, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 turned the mythical longing to return to Zion into a historical reality. But this potentially slippery slope between history and myth fascinates Yehoshua and fuels his quest to clarify the moral and practical responsibilities that accompany this recent reconfiguration of modern Jewish life in the ancient and contested homeland.

As we will see in the first chapter, most scholars recognize that Yehoshua's novels are constructed on several intersecting levels of signification—which in shorthand could be labeled psychological, sociological, historical, and historiosophic. However, their analyses of his works tend to focus, quite deliberately, on just one or two of these levels, in varying permutations. I believe that we can now adopt an integrative approach that slices across Yehoshua's oeuvre to unpack its rich multilayeredness. Thus, we can appreciate more fully the sophisticated way in which he weaves an abstract historiosophic conversation with concrete psychological and sociological issues, while always maintaining a close dialogue with history, especially

Jewish history, as the backdrop against which he assesses his current Israeli situation.

Suggestive names are among Yehoshua's most potent tools for drawing near and far into perspective. In *Friendly Fire* (*Esh yedidutit*, 2007), for instance, when a character named Yirmi (Jeremy) rants against his biblical namesake—Yirmi being short for Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah)—a connection is traced between the beleaguered prophet who ended up in Africa after witnessing the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, and Yehoshua's character, who exiles himself to Africa after losing his wife and son. Ongoing threats to Jewish survival and national stability since ancient times are further scaled down in this novel to a contemporary setting that toggles back and forth between Tel Aviv, Africa, Jerusalem, and Tulkarm in the West Bank. Yehoshua provides an even older perspective against which to compare Israel's contemporary dilemmas by alluding to the prehistoric era through the mission of an African team of anthropologists who are searching for the roots of humankind. Then, on each of its levels of signification, *Friendly Fire* plays with fire, bereavement, and national identity. Fire and bereavement were among the prophet Jeremiah's favorite keywords as he warned ancient Judeans about an impending destruction; but Yehoshua reminds us, too, that fire, domesticated in the prehistoric era, has created the foundation for a human civilization that continues to use and misuse its resources. Each of these frames of reference is further enacted multifocally through the Muslim, Jewish, and pagan characters that populate this novel's alternating settings in Israel and abroad.

In *The Extra* (*Nitzevet*, 2014) and *The Retrospective* (*Hesed Sefaradi*, 2011) other allusive names such as Honi (the "Circle Maker" from midrash) and Yair Moses ("may Moses illuminate") beg for an interpretation of the predicaments of these characters in light of their ancient referents. However, and always avoiding a hermetic interpretative allegory—a caveat one cannot emphasize strongly enough—Yehoshua scales down this national conversation to a pragmatic size, projecting his psychological and sociological scenarios unto a wider historical canvas, and vice versa, to conduct an historiosophic conversation with the reader above the heads of the characters. Extending a paradigm that is associated in Hebrew fiction primarily with the modernist writer S. Y. Agnon, Yehoshua burdens even his love plots with the weight of a complicated past, as shown in chapter 7, "Love Under the Burden of History."

In a similar manner, holiday settings play a salient role in several of Yehoshua's novels. *A Late Divorce* (*Geirushim meuharim*, 1982) takes place on Passover; *Friendly Fire* during Hanukkah, and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur figure prominently in *Mr. Mani* and *A Journey to the End of the Millennium* (*Masa el tom ha-elef*, 1997). The latter engages with Tisha b'Av, too, while Shabbat plays a provocative role in many of his novels. Given that Yehoshua loves to declare at every opportunity that he is an atheist dedicated to reconfiguring the civic and religious components of Israeli identity, it is important to understand how and why he deploys such traditional markers of Jewish identity as names and holidays. These motifs help him pave the way, not only for a clearer demarcation between modern and traditional beliefs, but also for a pragmatic renewal of Jewish values in the State of Israel, since religion, as he puts it, is simply "too important to be left to the religious."

Like Yehoshua's representations of names and holidays, the professional vocations of his characters draw us into a reconsideration of the boundaries between myth and history, which he regards as hopelessly muddled and in need of constant clarification. Even the impaired vision that Yehoshua assigns paradoxically to his blundering "watchmen over the house of Israel" models his plea to separate mythic postures from contemporary responsibilities. Taken together, these recurrent themes and tropes prompt a multifocal evaluation of Israel's contemporary mores in relation to all the alternative historical scenarios through which Yehoshua evokes a stimulating range of cultural options.

Circling back to an open dialogue with this author, my coda interrogates Yehoshua's definition of Jewish identity in a playful imitation of his masterpiece, *Mr. Mani*. This extraordinary novel features five consecutive speakers, who argue with six figures of authority whose opinions the reader must distill mainly from the replies of their interlocutors (because just the words of one conversation partner are provided at any given moment). Thus, Yehoshua's side of our conversation is naturally missing from my coda. I hope, nonetheless, that his point of view will come across as strongly as the positions of Mr. Mani's interlocutors do through the arguments of their conversation partners. Should I fail at this endeavor, Yehoshua's greater merit as a stylistic virtuoso and lucid intellectual will become more keenly evident by comparison.

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Today, one can celebrate that the field of Hebrew literature and Israel Studies is far more crowded than it was twenty-five years ago, at a time when Professor Bob Fagles, who for many years headed Princeton’s department of comparative literature, advised me to get on that bandwagon as soon as possible. At first, I did not heed his advice, but when I did, Ross Brann, Alan Mintz (z”l), and Gershon Hundert made a place for me on this wagon by inviting me to teach Hebrew literature at Cornell, Brandeis, and McGill. Inspiring discussions with Wendy Zierler go way back when. Ranen Omer-Sherman put in a kind word for the timeliness of this project, and Naomi Sokoloff offered good advice at a crucial turn. Finally, Patrick Alexander has been the approachable publisher that this project truly needed.

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