

A conversation with A.B. Yehoshua

Tom Sperlinger

‘I feel it was my great achievement,’ A.B. Yehoshua says of *Mr. Mani*, a novel first published in Israel in 1990. It is the story of five generations of one family, with each section told through a conversation in which we hear only one of the voices. Yehoshua relates this structure to the process of psychoanalysis – of which his wife, Rivka, is a practitioner – and says the book is an attempt ‘to understand a present trauma by crossroads in the past’. *Mr. Mani* was written shortly after the death of Yehoshua’s father, who was an Orientalist. ‘He was very important for me first of all because of his connection with the Arab population.’ On his father’s side, the family had been in Palestine for five generations and, late in his life, the elder Yehoshua wrote books about the Sephardic Jewish community in Jerusalem: ‘This was the treasure when I was writing *Mr Mani*, this was all the raw material for it.’

Yehoshua was born in Jerusalem in 1936. He has described himself as a ‘pre Zionist’ and yet he came to prominence as a writer among what has been termed ‘the generation of the state’. His mother had emigrated from Morocco and Yehoshua notes that she put ‘all her identity on the new Israeli identity; this is why, for me and for my sister, this identity was something that replaced the term Jew and enlarged it’.

Early in his career Yehoshua wrote stories that were surrealist or absurd, which he attributes to the fact that the Second World War had ‘hidden some basic conception of human nature’, and various plays. His first two novels, *The Lover* (published when he was 40) and *A Late Divorce*, were told using multiple voices because he felt that Israeli society could ‘not have a leading voice of narration’. They were followed by the comic novel *Molkho*, published in the UK as *Five Seasons*; *Mr. Mani*; *The Return from India* (published in the UK as *Open Heart*), a love story which was a bestseller but which he regards as his ‘least best’ work; *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, a recreation of Jewish history from 999 A.D., which has subsequently been turned into an opera; and *The Liberated Bride*, about an Orientalist named Rivlin’s attempts to understand his son’s divorce and the relationship between Jews and Arabs. *A Woman in Jerusalem* is about an unidentified victim of a suicide bombing, while *Friendly Fire* tells, among other stories, that of Yirmi, who lives in exile in Africa after his son’s accidental death in Gaza.

Yehoshua’s latest novel, *Spanish Charity*, will be published as *The Picture* in the UK by Peter Halban in 2012.

TS: I wonder if you could say a bit more about *The Picture*...

ABY: It is an examination of the forces of creation. Until this, I did not touch the question. My protagonists were not artists. I gave a course at the university about artists and creation in literary work and I always find problems in such works because the creation itself is not presented. I think that the only wonderful description of an artist is in

To the Lighthouse of Virginia Woolf when she describes Lily Briscoe. She is a very humble painter and it was not the *problem* of an artist. But I'm now 74 and this is time to deal with this thing. I chose a director of cinema because as a writer I am a scriptwriter, I am a director, I am a photographer, I am an actor – all of these functions I do when I am sitting at my desk. I wanted to separate these forces and to try and understand the dynamics between them. I was dealing especially with the dynamic between the scriptwriter who has the vision, who has the plan and the director who has to put it in order, to domesticate these forces. The scriptwriter in this novel was a very eccentric person and surrealist in his way and the director was more stable.

The director is more-or-less my age. He's coming to Santiago de Compostela to a retrospective of his films. The films have been dubbed to Spanish, so he sees them but without understanding the dialogue, so he can see other things in the film that he did not notice. This is to mention that a writer or artist never understands fully what he is doing.

All of it is based on a very famous picture. I myself was coming to Santiago de Compostela to receive a literary prize and in the room there was this very bizarre reproduction of what we call 'Caritas Romana'. I discovered a whole treasure of pictures like this that are based upon a very famous story done in the first century by a Roman writer, Maximus Valerius, about a person named Cimon who was condemned to death by starvation. His doctor was coming to visit him in his cell and feeding him by her breast.

TS: The same names come up again and again as influences when I read about your work: Faulkner, Kafka, Agnon...

ABY: Agnon is extremely important, not only for me but for a whole generation – we have gone to the grandfather, not to the father, to this old man, a religious writer. All of us were secular. Until now, he is the Flaubert, the Stendhal, the Joyce of Hebrew literature and he was connected to the sources of Judaism, the tradition, as a religious person. Religion and art in Judaism did not go well together at all, contrary to Catholicism that gave a lot of margins to art, painting, sculpture and poetry. Judaism was hostile to art because Judaism is a religion of daily work. If you are a creator you must be free. Judaism was very jealous about freedom in order that the Jews will not assimilate themselves. If you see Judaism during hundreds of years and you ask what they have done from the point of view of creation – almost nothing. Jews were sitting in Firenze, in Rome, near Shakespeare. What they have done? Only when secularism started in the middle of the nineteenth century, all this artistic energy was coming like a volcano. So Agnon was a unique case in which a true religious person was also a true artist – and he for us was a great inspiration.

TS: Are there other hidden influences on your work that are not talked about so much? I was interested that you mentioned Woolf...

ABY: I appreciate Virginia Woolf very much. I had the great chance to teach the best literature in my courses in university. I was doing an interpretation of works and I chose the best works from general literature and from Hebrew literature. And by repeating these

works I could enter into the most small details. From time-to-time I could take let's say a variation of one sentence from Woolf or from Faulkner or from others to my writing and of course this was helping me to be all the time in relationship to the best literature...

TS: Is it always a help?

ABY: I think it is a help. Because the most terrible thing for a writer is to read a mediocre novel. If it is really bad, you can detach yourself. If it is good, you always get inspiration. But if it's a mediocre, it's in-between – you always think: 'Oh this is what I'm doing also myself!'

TS: You said once that psychoanalysis is often moral work, in the sense of bringing someone to understanding. Is that true of literature as well?

ABY: I would demand that literature will deal with morality. Not to give answers, but to deal with the questions of morality. My feeling is that the retreat of literature from the front stage of morality in the last fifty years and giving the stage to the law, to the court or to the media, or to psychology... A very natural subject that was very much related to literature was given to the media, who are doing very quick but superficial work.

[The interview was interrupted by a phone call from a journalist asking Yehoshua to comment on a story related to Wikileaks revelations.]

TS: So this is an example of the way in which the novelist is a public figure in Israel?

ABY: There is a lot of respect to the novelist. Writers, novelists, critics of arts, intellectuals, were the father-founders of Zionism. I have to say, to the praise of Israel, that after 1967 when we – writers and poets – were in fierce opposition to the general tendency of the state, when we were speaking about the Palestinians and the Palestinian identity after '67, people were regarding us as people who wanted to create trouble, but there was always respect and all the channels were open to us. I put it like this: in the Bible you hear only the opposition, you don't hear the coalition, you don't hear the government. You hear the prophets. You don't hear the response of the kings, so it is a kind of a tradition that the prophets, if you agree with them or don't, if you think they are innocent or don't understand – you know they are speaking from a pure heart.

TS: While I've been in Israel, I read your short story 'Facing the Forests'. Can you tell me a bit about that story?

ABY: This story was written in 1962. It was the first entrance of me to the reality of Israel after the first nine stories that were detached from time and place. We were living in Jerusalem, there were some small trees and some bushes and we wanted to liberate the trees from all this stuff around them. We were tired so we made a fire. Then I was thinking 'we will burn also the young trees!' I created this story, which was about the question of repression. This bizarre student discovers that there was a village before the forest and the people are denying that there was a village. The Arab character, knowing

that there was a village there, tries to evoke the memory of this village by putting fire on the forest in order that the remains, the ruins will be discovered. The question was not that you could build again the village, but don't deny that there was a village – don't deny it. Open it and maybe you will avoid the fire that will come. I don't dare to say it, but in a prophetic way it made a point about the Palestinians coming back and speaking about their ruins, about their *nakba*. In 1962, this was a revelation.

TS: Ya'el in *A Late Divorce* says to Kedmi, 'I can only feel you, I've never been able to think you' and that she identifies vicariously with everyone. That made her sound like a writer...

ABY: Yes, you can identify and always I did not create a character I did not like. I don't like writers that are exploiting the characters in order to feel themselves strong, so they're making them so weak, miserable, ugly. In a certain way it's also a problem, because you avoid some – like Dickens has done, characters that he hated, that are terrible, that are vicious. Even if it is a vicious person he has something in himself that I can respect or appreciate. So in this sense, she's right when she's reflecting that she's identifying a little bit too automatically, without judgement.

[...] In the process of writing the most difficult thing is always the beginning. In the beginning, the 30-40 first pages – even less, in the 20 first pages, I put an effort of five months or something, in order to tune the style and especially to identify the main protagonist – and then when I have started after a very short time I know where I am going. I know what will be the end. But I don't write it, I don't touch it. I can go a whole novel, that is three years of writing, knowing what is the end and never write it because I want to come to the end with all the material that I accumulate during the road to the end, not to close it already.

I didn't succeed all the time. In the last novel there was a very big problem in the middle, I could not solve it. So I went to the two or three last chapters, I wrote the end. Then I was very pleased with the end. The end is very special! So then I was saying: 'OK, now I cannot quit the novel because of this hole in the middle because I have so beautiful an end already.' There was the mine in Chile and I was struggling with this hole, like the people in the mine in Chile were struggling and little by little I lifted the people from the bottom of the earth!

TS: You've said that the idea for *Mr Mani* came to you all-at-once?

ABY: Yes, this was in 1982 when I was mobilised to the war in Lebanon, as a lecturer in the army. I was feeling as if my family [Israel] was becoming crazy and I have to understand it through history and to go backwards, like in a psychoanalytic process. My father was dying. It was in the last three months of his agony and the combination of his malady and the war – the idea of writing about five conversations and different crossroads of history all speaking about Mr. Mani was almost created in one night. I started with the third conversation between the British Jewish officer with his colonel in Jerusalem in 1918 and then I was thinking it was too difficult. So I put it aside and I

wrote a totally different novel that is called *Five Seasons*; these two novels were written alongside one another and are considered, also by me, my best works.

TS: I think you've said that the fifth conversation was written during the first intifada, the Palestinian uprising 1987-93?

ABY: Yes, this was in the first intifada. That for me is the peak of my writing. The fifth chapter involves the original Avraham Mani and the conception that the Arabs are Jews that have forgotten that they are Jews. This is not a crazy theory, it is a theory that the leaders of Zionism were thinking – it's natural that there are Jews that remain here and when the Arabs came they had been converted to Islam. There was even an examination of the DNA of some of the Palestinians and some of them, we have the same DNA. So you have these two peoples in conflict and perhaps they are coming from the same origin. This man Joseph Mani, Avraham's son, has his *idée fixe* that if he will remind the Arabs that they are Jews that have forgotten they are Jews, perhaps there will be a reconciliation and there will be a Jewish majority here. And it was the first intifada – which was not painful, bloody like the second intifada.

But the way in which we had started to try to oppress the first intifada... I remember Yitzhak Rabin saying that when the Palestinians started to throw stones, the soldiers were saying 'From where they are, these Palestinians? We did not see them before.' Rabin didn't understand, it took him time. Peres was Foreign Minister and Rabin was Defence Minister and Peres understood what is going on with the revolt of the Palestinian people. Peres invited Amos Oz, S.Yizhar and Haim Gouri and myself to speak to Rabin in his house, to explain to Rabin what is happening. You could not imagine it – the Foreign Minister inviting one poet and three writers to speak with the Defence Minister about the intifada. Rabin was very nervous and he did not like what we were saying.

TS: I wanted to ask you about the theme of fathers and sons in *Mani*...

ABY: This was something original that I tried, to see what is the unconscious that is working through five generations. We know our parents, we are very much preoccupied with our parents; we know something about our grandparents and something is transferred from them. But then if you go to the father of our grandfather and the grandfather of our grandfather, they are in darkness – if they are not special people that you have documents about, they are totally unknown. So I wanted to give to the reader the possibility to do the work of the unconscious that is transferred from generation to generation – because only the reader can know that Mr Mani from the first conversation is bound or obsessed by the desire to commit suicide because of the fifth generation, the fifth conversation.

TS: And the story of Abraham and Isaac is almost another level of that?

ABY: The story of the binding of Isaac is the essential myth in the Jewish tradition. This is a horrible myth, from all points of view. The only explanation that I could give was to give it as totally secular: there is no God, it's only Abraham talking to himself. He left his

house, he had broken all the statues of his father, changed the religion and come to Palestine. He is afraid that his son will do the same thing to him. So he is preparing a kind of a theatre for Isaac. He takes him and puts him on an altar and then says: 'I want to kill you'. And then at the last moment he says 'God has saved you. You are now bound to this God, not intellectually, not by your belief, but existentially.' So he meant only to threaten him. There is a very fundamental expression in the prayer 'the fear of Isaac' – the fear of Isaac is something that is going through generations.

I wanted to destroy this myth. Even if you explain it through the secular explanation, still it is a horrible thing. The Jews believe this myth that you can bring the knife very near to the heart but still in the last moment you will be safe. I wanted to destroy this myth by doing it. So in the last chapter of *Mani*, when Avraham Mani knows that his son is not going to have a baby of his own and Joseph all the time is going with the *idée fixe* that the Arabs are Jews, Avraham has to eliminate Joseph, in the same place in which there was the binding of Isaac according to the tradition. I believed – of course in naiveté – that by taking the potential threat of it into a reality, we can finish with the myth.

TS: It felt to me as though everything you wrote after *Mani* is quite different, as though that book changed a lot of things for you?

ABY: Yes, it was less experimental. I returned more to classic writing like *Open Heart* and *The Liberated Bride* and, before that, *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*. I really felt that novel was a very courageous thing, to go deep into history. In Israel, the historical novel wasn't at all popular. Reality is so hectic, so dramatic that people did not go to history and we are not a historical people, we are a mythological people. When I go to Britain, France or Germany, you see how history is kept and the layers of history. So in that book to dig back to history and to try to recreate Jewish life or Jewish reality, it was very difficult.

My first novel I wrote and published when I was 40. Writers like me are publishing their novels in their twenties and I always say to young writers, 'Don't *rush* to the novel. Write short stories, write novellas.' It's very important because your relationship to the language is less functional. You are not using the language like in the press. In a short story you have to be more careful with the language – like in poetry. I was writing one short story a year, very slow. But when I came to the novel, I was also splitting it into different monologues, keeping still the style of a short story, because each monologue was unique by itself. So after I wrote *Mani*, I was saying 'now I can go in a classical way to the original form of the novel'.

I want to just refer to something in relation to *Five Seasons*. *Open Heart* was the last book I wrote in the first person. Always I am hesitating, even in the last book, about the first person or the third person. I start with the third person then I shift to the first person, then I return back to the third person – with the last novel, with *A Woman in Jerusalem*, in *The Liberated Bride*. I've just realised that in the last books I always prefer the third person because it gives me the ability to play a little bit with the unconscious and conscious, while in the first person the revelation, the confession is far more strong and

the person who is telling the story about himself cannot explain his motivations. When it is the third person, you don't know exactly what he thinks – like Molkho in *Five Seasons*, he is doing things and you don't know if he understands what he is doing or not and there is a very special place, a vacuum in which the reader can enter and play. This gives a comic space. Even in the last book, I changed the first and second chapter into the first person and gave it to others – and my wife said, 'No, it is too narcissistic in a certain way'. I don't know, perhaps the next novel I will try to do it – because all of my first stories, most of them were written in the first person.

TS: Is your wife a very important reader for you?

ABY: Of course. But not in the beginning. I don't talk about my work when I start but when I have a whole chapter, I give it to her and then I run away from the home and go in the streets and return and look upon her face.

TS: I kept reading things about *The Liberated Bride* that said it was about separation and I couldn't make sense of that because to me the book had been all about connectedness...

ABY: If I had to say what is the theme of *The Liberated Bride*, it is crossing borders and borders. I wrote it with optimism, it was a time in which you could go to the West Bank without any problem, there was no border. I think that if I have to define Zionism with one word it is 'borders'. The Jews did not know what borders are, all their history they were crossing borders in all senses. And the fact that Israel until now has not decided about its borders – a pupil in school if you say to him 'What is your country?' he doesn't know. In the novel, the two stories are totally separate from each other but are combined together by the fact that the Arabs are helping the Jews to solve the most intimate questions of their lives, what was happening with the divorce of Rivlin's son.

TS: And is that also relevant to the scene with *The Dybbuk*?

ABY: The *Dybbuk* was [laughing] a crazy idea. This play is like *Hamlet* for English people. The fact that [in *The Liberated Bride*] the Arabs are playing *The Dybbuk* and changing the languages... OK, I have to say something a little bit unpleasant about the Jews. 'Dybbuk' is something entering into your soul and you cannot get rid of it. The Jews are of course experts in entering into other people's lives and then it is so difficult to get them out! And when they want to go out, they are not capable. It's amazing when you examine our history and now we are entering the West Bank and the problem is how we will get out of it. The possibility of the Jew is to be everywhere because his identity is in his head. You can be an Englishman in Argentina for a certain time, but then you don't have the language, you don't have the structure. But the Jew can stay for hundreds of years because he keeps his identity through prayers, through other means in his head. When there was the invasion in Iraq they found one Jew in Baghdad!

In the story there were many reasons to play with this 'dybbuk', including at the national level – the two people are bound together. We have tied ourselves to the Palestinian people in such a way that we will not be able to separate.

TS: Rivlin is interested in the post-colonial reckoning in Algeria. I wondered how much you thought those colonial analogies applied to Israel and how much there is a fear when you're writing about a post-colonial reckoning in Israel?

ASY: Yes, because in Algeria the French interfered very deeply in the Algerian identity. After the liberation of Algeria, in the 1990s, there was a terrible kind of civil war. It was not even a civil war because people were killing each other. So what was the reason? My feeling was that there was some kind of disturbance by another identity that penetrated into the national identity and then even after they are getting out there is still a kind of a curse. When we will leave the West Bank after interfering very deeply in the Palestinian identity, what will happen?

TS: I wanted to ask you about *A Woman in Jerusalem* and the theme of guilt and responsibility...

ABY: This was written in the most difficult days of the second intifada and it was really dreadful because only here in Haifa I remember three terrible bombs in restaurants. It was terrible and especially the fact that the terrorist was committing suicide so there was not even the pleasure of catching him and punishing him, so his blood was mingled with the blood of the others. This was the first time after the War of Independence that most of the casualties were civilians. For the soldiers we have a whole system of honouring them. But for civilians, what will you do? This person was drinking his coffee and reading his newspaper and then he is killed. He was killed for what positive purpose? He was not killed for me.

Israeli society had become very tough. In the morning a bus exploded and in the afternoon they have taken the ruins of the bus, cleaned the road and in the evening there was the usual news. As a task of a writer, as I say it in a metaphor, I have to penetrate with my pen through the black plastic that wrapped the dead and especially the unidentified dead. So the characters in this story are called by their function, not by their personalities. I didn't even call it a novel, not a novella, I called it 'passion', meaning the way in which the person who presents their alienation, their indifference, is going to take on little-by-little responsibility, solidarity, even love for a cleaning woman, who is strange, not Jewish, was unidentified. Like in *As I Lay Dying* by Faulkner it has the movement with a coffin – it is even a religious process, in which he takes more and more responsibility.

TS: Conflict has been so much the subject of your writing. I've wondered whether in some ways it's a burden as a writer and in other ways – this is a bit crude – almost a lucky break, in having a subject around which to organise your work?

ABY: Yes, it's good for a writer; there is a conflict, there is death, there is all this great subject. You don't have to invent a cancer for the character or a road accident. It was, of course, a little bit easy as a subject, you could immediately manipulate a situation, a battle, a military conflict to feed the dramatic situation and it is dramatic because the fact

that people are coming to the army from different classes immediately creates a kind of tension.

TS: You've written so much about the figure of the exile. With Yirmi in *Friendly Fire* that figure takes a different turn.

ABY: Yirmi is going to a place in which there is no sign of Jewishness. He tries it and he has some justification for himself after the killing of his son. He sees that there is something wrong in Jewishness itself because he cannot get any meaning to the death of his son, because it was by friendly fire. The book is unfinished so I don't know if he will succeed but the fact that he wants to go deep to the sources of his Jewishness and to destroy something, the nucleus of it, this is from time-to-time my desire. I say it always and people are stunned: We are a failure. The Holocaust is a failure of us. We are not guilty of the murder, of course – the Germans are guilty. But we are a failure that we did not see that such things will happen to us.

TS: And again maybe responsible without being guilty?

ABY: Yes, responsible because we did not see all the red lights that were glittering all over history and saying 'Be careful'. When Zionism was started it said that the problem is not to change the world, the problem is to change the Jew and I felt this was a very moral saying. Here again in Israel today, after all our success and our victories, what we are doing? Again repeating the same thing that afterwards will bring us to kind of a disaster.

TS: Was there a moment when you were younger when you decided that writing was your profession?

ABY: I would say that it is an indication in which time I was writing in the paper, when you are boarding in a country and you're asked 'What is your profession?', I was writing 'professor' and then at a certain time I was changing it from 'professor' to 'writer'...

TS: And when was that?

ABY: I think it was about fifteen years ago. I was always saying 'OK I am a professor who is writing', but this is my profession, this is where I get my salary. Then when the revenue was coming from books, I was thinking 'OK, this is my profession and I put 'writer''.

[...] You have to fight every book again and again. Each book is a battle by itself. I always make a difference between two kinds of writers, writers who have a world and writers who have subjects. I'm a writer moving from subject to subject and there are writers like Faulkner, like Appelfeld, who have a world and they are all the time turning this world around and doing variations here and there. I am changing subject and this is the reason why I can renew myself. There are novelists even who have characters coming from one book to another book. I was not too much on biography, I did not put my life into the books.

TS: I read a lot of your books in quick succession and I think with a lot of writers I would have had an uneasy sense of them in the books. I couldn't place you in the books, maybe more in Rivlin, but I wasn't just reading through your life...

ABY: Yes, now with *Spanish Charity*, immediately all the critics were saying, 'Oh here is Yehoshua himself!' They were starving to have a bit of my autobiography, because now it's all personal, all the time. I don't like it. You don't do an effort to identify with another person, to create other characters, you all the time write from the top of your belly.

TS: I was re-reading the end of *The Lover*, the closing line of which in English is, 'The people will wonder what's happened to Na'im that he's suddenly so full of hope'. I wondered whether you are hopeful?

ABY: I was considered one of the optimists among my friends. From time-to-time when people were in despair they were calling me and I said to them, 'You have to pay for my optimism, like the telephone sex lines!' I believe in change and this is also in the end of my works – in *The Liberated Bride* and *A Woman in Jerusalem* and the last novel, there is reconciliation, there is some sort of appeasement, it's not like *A Late Divorce*, which was finishing in a catastrophe and also *Mani*. Now I try to come to a conclusion of optimism, of reconciliation, of compromise – especially in the last novel. With the Israeli-Arab conflict, it is one of the longest conflicts on Earth. I don't know, I hope something will happen now little-by-little. It is the question of the future of my children, my grandchildren. I cannot permit myself to be pessimistic.

This interview took place in Haifa on 13 April 2011. A shorter version appeared in The Reader magazine alongside an extract from 'The Picture'.