

THE RETROSPECTIVE IMAGINATION OF A. B. YEHOSHUA by Yael Halevi-Wise. 2021. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 206 pp.

Laura Wiseman
York University

This cogent, comprehensive literary analysis of the collected works of A. B. Yehoshua (1936-2022), emerged in circumstances muffled by Covid prohibitions and deserves audible acclaim. Yael Halevi-Wise has been occupied with ‘her author’ – personally and with his writing – for over half her life. In fact, his name is sprinkled like redolent *za‘atar* over the titles of her published works of the last couple of decades. What initially attracted this scholar’s attention to Yehoshua’s books was her penchant for novels with characters who argue (Halevi-Wise, 2021, ix). She has encountered no small number of these to examine in Yehoshua’s oeuvre. Her articles analyze the personalities, themes, structures and motifs of the novels in depth, and now fuel the broader agenda of this book.

Halevi-Wise distills the need that occasioned its composition as follows. “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” (xiv). Halevi-Wise’s illuminating literary analyses fulfill the need, and then some.

From her vantage point of familiarity with Yehoshua’s full opus, and with the acuity of her deep analyses of his individual works, Halevi-Wise conveys that it is time to take a wide-angle view of the oeuvre: “to expand this analysis of Yehoshua’s individual works into a more systematic awareness of his major themes and compositional patterns” (xii). To this end, the scholar devises a capacious typology of Yehoshua’s novels that “pays particular attention to their multilayered nature and concomitant strategies: repetitions, variations and reworkings of themes in the novels that span the last four decades” (xii).

Halevi-Wise sets out an inventive, multidimensional metaphor to illustrate the interconnected ‘multilayeredness’: “Perhaps the easiest way to describe Yehoshua’s characteristic style is to imagine his novels as a

multistoried house with a main floor, a basement, upper stories and wings. The challenges facing the main characters [...] are staged on the main floor, while Yehoshua's preoccupations with the people of Israel are discussed partly over their heads, [...] in upper stories accessible through references to traditional Jewish concepts and symbols that go back to ancient times [...]. A deeper psychoanalysis of the characters is worked out in [...] the basement area. And in the wings, we are invited to compare Israel's sociopolitical circumstances with alternate places and eras that spin the present into a wider perspective" (2). The researcher returns, at intervals, to aspects of this metaphor in unfolding vignettes that support her proposed typology.

Halevi-Wise's typology encompasses chapters called "Condition-of-Israel Novels," "Mapping A.B. Yehoshua's Worldview," "The Watchman's Stance," "Vocations," "Holidays," "Names," and "Love Under the Burden of History" with an intriguing conclusion. This review focuses on four of many distinctive developments in Halevi-Wise's work, in context. They encompass Yehoshua's contemporary "watchman stance"; a crystallization of Yehoshua's worldview, in which ethnographic concerns figure prominently in connection with the wellbeing of Israel, particularly in the relationships among its inhabitants; a transition from a heretofore conventional application of motifs to invoke the mythical character of the Land Israel, to their use to underscore the historical facts of the modern State of Israel's establishment, existence, and persistence; and Halevi-Wise's profound study of love and love triangles, Yehoshua-style: laden with historical responsibility. The review continues with a sampling of the scholar's unique expressions of convictions, followed by a glance at the volume's compelling closure: a creative coda.

One of the major developments in this volume is Halevi-Wise's elaboration on her original, striking work on "The Watchman's Stance" (2017), in which she notes that many of Yehoshua's characters expand on – or undermine – roles in relation to national identity, roles that were conventionally assigned to biblical prophets. Those biblical watchmen over the house of Israel usually directed the people's attention inward, to focus on national identity and relationships among members of the populace. Halevi-Wise asserts that Yehoshua replaces conventional biblical prophets with updated watchmen, who direct their attention outward, on intercultural and international relations. Yehoshua positions these characters in all manner of occupations and professions. Halevi-

Wise interprets the significance of this literary enterprise as follows: “The construction of this stratified multifocality is what enables Yehoshua to address questions of national identity and responsibility that acquire 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” (xiv). This point is significant, as Halevi-Wise clarifies, because it expresses the worries and expectations that Yehoshua holds for contemporary Israelis and Israel. She delineates both in a full articulation of his worldview, to be discussed next. In essence, the scholar conveys that the evolutions to Yehoshua’s contemporary watchmen are marshalled in service of his worldview.

Halevi-Wise’s expanded formulation of Yehoshua’s contemporary worldview is a second principal development in this book. It is predicated on his conception of twenty to twenty-first century Israel. She explains that Yehoshua perceives the stability of contemporary Israel as closely connected to the ways in which Israelis interact with their neighbors, near and far. Implicit in Yehoshua’s updated image of the watchman are what Halevi-Wise identifies as “his two key preoccupations: his fear that the Jewish people might find themselves again in the same vulnerable position 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 alternate cultural scenarios, which put their own contemporary Israeli life into a defamiliarizing perspective” (xii-xiii). By casting his contemporary watchmen in a variety of vocations and professions, and sending them to all corners of the country and of the earth, Yehoshua subtly shares warnings regarding the dangers of dispersion and prophecies in the actions of the ordinary citizens, as well as signals the importance of participating in “evolving interactions between representatives of diverse ethnicities, religions, and nationalities” in Jerusalem, in the surrounding Mediterranean regions, and abroad (xiii). Accordingly, in Chapter 2, Halevi-Wise incorporates illustrations of the above expectations of the characters through vignettes in Yehoshua’s novels. In the process she uses maps to depict their locations. She traces the characters’ literal and figurative, physical and metaphorical border crossings and re-crossings, and interprets their significance for national identity and intercultural relations. It thus appears that the primary portfolio of Yehoshua’s twenty-first century watchmen, is integrally linked to his worldview: whether they are auto mechanics, soldiers, hoteliers, doctors, houseguests, parents, children or siblings –

foundational to their mandate as watchmen is the responsibility for the bolstering of intercultural relations as well as active service in wide-reaching diplomacy.

In consolidating her view of Yehoshua's overall literary agenda, Halevi-Wise positions the author, himself, as the consummate watchman over the house of Israel. She describes his stance as "a position from which he expects that every *bodily present* member of this house – whether Jew or Arab, young or elderly – will also participate in the moral and practical regeneration of life in the ancient Jewish homeland. The primary goal for Yehoshua is therefore to facilitate a reconfiguration of a national covenant that goes back to ancient times" (159–160). The activities of his characters suggest, time and again, that he seeks creative solutions to calibrate personal and national matters, as well as to mediate tensions between present and past (160).

A third distinctive development in this book is Halevi-Wise's discernment of a formative shift in Yehoshua's deployment of Jewish motifs, reflected in his use of vocations, names and holidays. Throughout the ages, writers of Hebrew literature have implanted, in their compositions, Jewish motifs borrowed from all strata of the Jewish canon and counted on their mythical properties as conceptualized in the collective conscience of the dispersed people of Israel. Halevi-Wise observes that more recently, in Yehoshua's hands, such motifs undergo a transition. They evolve from their status of myth to the status of history. In his work, the establishment of the modern State of Israel is a grounded fact, and its existence – a historical entity. Gone is the ancient, aching yearning of the people for the mythical entity of "Eretz Yisrael." Yehoshua's work has largely banished "atavistic longings for *yemey kedem* (days of old)" (10). In their stead Yehoshua invests motifs, such as the various vocations of present-day watchmen, with practical challenges that the characters face in "complex entanglements between the aspirations and realities of Israelis and members of other nations with whom they come into contact, in the present time and other eras, both within Israel and around the globe" (10).

In a comparative segment, where Halevi-Wise differentiates between Agnon's early modern Hebrew writing and Yehoshua's more contemporary works, she addresses their uses of names. Whereas both tend to invest their choices of characters' names with symbolism, and Yehoshua tends to overburden "even [...] love plots with the weight of a complicated past" (xv), Halevi-Wise notes that in choosing characters'

names, Yehoshua, unlike Agnon, actually “scales down (this) [the] national conversation to a pragmatic size” (xv). He does not overdo the heft of the symbolism built into characters’ appellations. Instead, he reaches for pragmatism by rerouting the conversation and its locus, in a manner of speaking. Halevi-Wise interprets this move as follows. He projects “his psychological and sociological scenarios onto a wider historical canvas [...] to conduct an historiosophic conversation with the readers above the heads of the characters” (xv). In a similarly practical maneuver, Yehoshua uses holiday motifs in a transformed way. Halevi-Wise asserts that they “help him pave the way, not only for a demarcation between contemporary and classical 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.’” (xvi). Both observations are meant, by the scholar, as compliments on a grand scale to Yehoshua for his skill at providing a platform, through his writing, from which ideas about national and religious renewal can be generated and entertained productively.

The depths to which Halevi-Wise plumbs Yehoshua’s approaches to love, and interprets the significance of overlapping, interpersonal relationships in the novels, present a fourth formidable strand among many that stand out in her book. In truth, Chapter 7 – “Love Under the Burden of History” – could be the basis for an entire tome. Halevi-Wise asserts that historically laden love triangles appear in Yehoshua’s writing from its inception. She traces ways in which Yehoshua both engages with, and diverges from, the plots and characters of time-honored Agnonian love triangles, familiar to readers of early modern Hebrew literature. In a fascinating, comparative, literary-historical foray, Halevi-Wise theorizes the basis for certain commonalities among love triangles in the writings of Agnon, Yehoshua, and heavily burdened exemplars by Faulkner. Among the most compelling reasons she offers is that they all draw on canonical characters and motifs of the Hebrew Bible to confer selected features upon “their dysfunctional families” (151). In the cases of Yehoshua and Agnon, she observes, the inclination is “to engage more humorously and optimistically with biblical and midrashic traditions of national restoration and repair, while nonetheless stressing how much the past continues to exert a dangerous pressure on the present” (151). Despite the author’s sense of the ironic, this extra weight, it seems, is the very burden of history to which Yehoshua subjects love. As Halevi-Wise phrases it, “his representations of [...] intimate relations are invariably

fraught with a historicized baggage [...] that threatens, at any moment, to spiral such triangulations out of control” (155).

An aspect of this volume that registers strongly is the author’s originality in turns of phrase. Halevi-Wise voices her convictions throughout in inimitable locutions: sometimes sassy in their incisiveness, always erudite. To choose a sample that furthers the above focus on love triangles Yehoshua-style, see for example, Halevi-Wise’s projection of the author’s hypothetical potential to pen an “oedipal showdown at the site of the *akedah*” (156): conjecture that is simultaneously fraught with danger, weighed down with ancient baggage, yet rendered with irony. In sum, Halevi-Wise’s pithy pronouncements are bound to educate and delight researcher and lay literature lover alike.

Finally, Halevi-Wise’s voice is the only one we hear during the one-sided telephone conversation that she extemporizes to conclude the book. She formats it in the style of *Mr. Mani*, a novel that “historicizes geography and spatializes history” (68). We imagine Yehoshua as her interlocutor. The conversation is replete with playful argumentation or, more precisely, feigned resistance to it: “Fine, let’s not argue today [...] Okay, fine, let’s not argue” (162, 167). This longed-for *tête-à-tête* stands as *homage* to A. B. Yehoshua. It celebrates Halevi-Wise’s longstanding relationship with the author and his work and laments their loss. With it she bids a personal farewell to her dear “Boolie,” *zikhrono livrakha*. Finally, in our eyes, it forms a poignant coda to this vital, scholarly volume.

WORKS CITED

- Halevi-Wise, Yael. 2021. *The Retrospective Imagination of A. B. Yehoshua*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . 2017. The Watchman’s Stance in A. B. Yehoshua’s Fiction, *Hebrew Studies* 58: 357–382.

Additional works by Yael Halevi-Wise on the writing of A. B. Yehoshua

- Halevi-Wise, Yael. 2019. A. B. Yehoshua and the Novel of Vocation, *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 37: 688–710 (special issue in memory of Alan Mintz z”l).

- . 2017. Holidays in A. B. Yeshoshua's Opus and Ethos, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 35.2: 55–80.
- . 2016. La formation d'une identité israélienne dans l'œuvre de A.B. Yehoshua. *Une journée avec Avraham Yehoshua. La célibataire, revue Lacanienne* 30: 161–172.
- . 2014. Where is the Sephardism in A. B. Yehoshua's *Hesed Sefardi/ The Retrospective?* *Sephardic Horizons* 4.1
<http://www.sephardichorizons.org/>