

# The Ordinary Scene, Sacrifice, and the Politics of Normalization in A.B. Yehoshua's *Mr. Mani*

**Adam Katz**

**Department of English  
Quinnipiac University  
Hamden, CT 06518  
[Adam.Katz@quinnipiac.edu](mailto:Adam.Katz@quinnipiac.edu)**

In a short essay on his novel, *Mr. Mani*, the Israeli novelist A.B. Yehoshua declares his intentions for the novel: to free Israeli Jews from the “menacing myth” (64) of the *akedah*, the binding and aborted sacrifice of Isaac. The way he tried to do this, he says, was to turn “that which in the bible story was merely a threatened sacrifice” into “an awesome reality”: “by actualizing the murderous threat I could perhaps discredit its appeal and perhaps extricate the very soul of this bedrock story. This is what I refer to when I say I am annulling the sacrifice of Isaac by its fulfillment” (64). In this essay I will suggest that the logic of transference implicit in Yehoshua’s project—to exorcise an ambivalent founding narrative by dramatizing or acting out its logical conclusions—takes the novel well beyond Yehoshua’s explicit intentions in a manner that is of great interest to ordinary thinking.

Yehoshua’s opposition to the centrality of the *akedah* story in Judaism rests upon more than the fact that it is clearly objectionable in moral terms. Rather, Yehoshua is most concerned by “its growing negative implications for our national self image” (63). On this level, the *akedah* story interferes with the normalization of the Jewish people at which Zionism aims, as a result of which national unification would be based upon “territory, language and history” (64) (“as all other peoples are constituted” [64]), rather than upon the “melding of seed and creed” (64). The Jewish insistence on singularity is in this case really a compulsive reiteration of the (self-)sacrificial structure of Jewish identity represented by the *akedah*. That is, Isaac, in a scene presumably reiterated throughout Jewish history, can only secure his identity in the proximity of martyrdom. This provides an explanation of decisions made by Jews collectively throughout history, which can be accounted for as pathological attempts to court martyrdom. The transcendence of sacrifice, often taken to be the meaning of the *akedah* story, is in this case taken to be an insidious internalization of sacrificial logic.

Yehoshua's attack on the *akedah* seems to follow the familiar Enlightenment pattern of demystification. This involves, first of all, secularizing the story by rendering it in psychologically plausible terms: "it is precisely from the secular perspective that the story of the *Akedah* is plausible, and it is from such a viewpoint that I consider it and can accept its moral coherence" (63). Thus, in addition to replacing the threatened sacrifice with an actual one, Yehoshua replaces the divinely sanctioned sacrifice with one conceived in "credible psychological and realistic" (64) terms. According to Yehoshua's reading of the *Akedah*, Abraham, in founding his family line on iconoclasm, that is, "a new faith in a new unitary god," to which end "he broke the idols in the home of his father" (63), was naturally concerned that his son might grow up and do the same to him. To prevent this, "he stages an *akedah*," terrifying Isaac and then convincing him that he "owed his life to his father's God."

In addition to thus explaining the *akedah*, Yehoshua also seeks to marginalize its place in the history of Jewish national existence: "[t]hroughout the remainder of the Bible there are no further references to the *akedah* story" (63). The "major emphasis on the myth within Jewish theology began much later than the Bible, but since then, of course, it has thrived" (63). Decoding this in terms of the Zionist "creed," the *akedah* story was produced to account for a "pre-national" mode of Jewish existence, was marginalized during the "national" period of a broader, territorially based "Israeli" identity (the period recorded in most of the Bible), and then "thrives" in the exilic period. The implication is clear: the *akedah* is a Diasporic myth, and for Yehoshua a symptom of the "neurotic" condition of exile.<sup>(1)</sup> Its continuance in present day Israel therefore interferes with the normalization of the Jewish people and the development of a broader "Israeli" (rather than Diasporic "Jewish") identity.<sup>(2)</sup>

Yehoshua concludes his brief essay as follows:

For all its implausibility and lack of realism, the concept of the modern Canaanites will always serve as a fruitful challenge to Zionist Israel. When I wrote the "Fifth conversation" for *Mr. Mani*, we were in the first difficult months of the Intifada, before we became inured to atrocity, and every dead Palestinian child still caused us sleepless nights. At the time, I recalled that at the beginning of Zionism, Ben Gurion and President Ben Zvi came up with the peculiar notions that Yosef Mani [the "Isaac" of the book's culminating "conversation"] propounds—that the Arabs of the country were merely converted descendants of Jews who had remained devoted to the land after the destruction of the Second Temple. And that perhaps due to their attachment to the land they gave up their loyalty to the faith of their fathers. Yet now we torture our brothers of old with the afflictions of the occupation. (64-5)<sup>2</sup>

This tortured (in more ways than one) paragraph requires quite a bit of explication. The Canaanites were a small group of (mostly) modernist artists and writers who, in the early days of the state of Israel, argued that the Jews were really (or should see themselves as) “Canaanites,” that is, descendants, along with the Arab occupants of the land, of the people who lived there prior to the founding of the ancient “Israeli” commonwealth. Although their political program was utterly ineffectual (a bizarre, eclectic mix of the expansionism of the extreme Right with the anti-Zionism of the extreme Left), the Canaanites have had enormous influence on Israeli art and culture, including Yehoshua himself.<sup>(3)</sup> This is undoubtedly because they took “normalization” to its logical conclusion, aiming at utterly erasing all traces of an “abnormal” history.

Here, while marking their ideas as “implausible” and “unrealistic,” Yehoshua also notes with nostalgia the (fleeting) appearance of these “peculiar notions” in the mainstream of Zionist thought, while the character whose tragic end is the *akedah* enacted in the novel is the representative of those ideas. But this means that, in the sacrifice enacted in *Mr. Mani*, the victim is the advocate of normalization who is too explicit, extreme, and in advance of his time. On the face of it, this poses no problem for Yehoshua’s thesis—presenting his “Isaac” as a forward-thinking supporter of normalization simply implicates modern Zionist politics, with its inability to abandon its commitment to Jewish singularity, in the logic of the *akedah*. But “Canaanism” was necessarily ahead of its time (implausible and unrealistic) because it was an iconoclastic *creed* of normalization. As such, it cannot be assimilated to normalization itself (it cannot enter the promised land). The Canaanites ultimately reproduced the double bind of normalization: what greater proof of abnormality can there be than the elaborate codification of the fantasy of normalcy? And it is this creed of normalization that is paradoxically offered up as a sacrifice in Yehoshua’s novel.

Let us now consider the implication that normalization is a condition of genuine peace with “our brothers of old,” the Palestinian Arabs. On Yehoshua’s account, the Arabs are a positive model to be emulated: they remained attached to the land rather than the “faith of their fathers” and were rewarded with the “normal,” national existence which the Jews are now seeking. At the same time, of course, they don’t realize who they “really” are, and, without this, a genuine reciprocity between “Jews who have forgotten they are Jews” and “Jews who can’t forget they are Jews” is impossible. The Jewish experience of alienation and exile is therefore crucial for the equation. Yehoshua’s proposed path to normalization is thus founded upon mimetic rivalry between Israelis and Palestinians: each has a competing and commensurable claim to the central object. This becomes especially clear when we realize that, as a result of the Jewish drive for normalization, the Palestinians have “acquired” just such an experience, along with their own claims to singularity, as

the “Jews of Israel,” or the “Jews of the Arab world.”

My reading of the novel will suggest that Yehoshua therefore exceeds his intentions by articulating a mode of Israeli identity dependent upon an agonistic form of reciprocity with the Palestinians. It is a form of reciprocity that can be sustained only insofar as the terms of exchange are inherently paradoxical, implicating “normalization” in “singularity,” “territory” in “creed,” and vice versa. The novel does this, as I will show, not by discrediting the *akedah* but by transforming it from a founding story into one possible response to the revelation of the paradoxical nature of the originary scene. Of course, this argument for reciprocity can appear apologetic, that is, as justifying the current unequal relations between the two peoples. And Palestinians might not find the claim that they are “Jews who have forgotten that they are Jews” much of an invitation to dialogue. Implicit in the argument of Yehoshua’s novel, however, is a mode of Israeli-Palestinian engagement that would transform resentment and “elevate” mimetic rivalry: the rule of the game would be that Palestinians likewise put forward a narrative of their own that includes Israeli Jews in alienating, but ultimately “answerable” terms.

*Mr. Mani* is, as Gershon Shaked says, an “anti-family anti-saga” (277), tracing five generations of fathers and sons from the Mani family in and out of Jerusalem from 1848 to 1982. It is told in the form of five “conversations,” in which we are given one side of the conversation and must infer the contribution of the other partner. The conversations, furthermore, are given in reverse order, with the final conversation in the book therefore the first chronologically. Each conversation is set at a crucial point in modern Jewish history, where some alternative regarding the various possibilities of “normalization” (assimilation, Zionism, peace with the Palestinians) is on the agenda.<sup>(4)</sup> Finally, with the exception of the final conversation, no Mani is a conversation partner—the conversations are *about* the Manis, to whom we are therefore exposed in a mediated fashion.

The relationship between the conversation partners in the first four conversations is strikingly similar (I am setting aside the final conversation, which does not fit this pattern, and needs to be addressed separately). In each case, we have a younger speaker and an older interlocutor who is, for the most part, a listener. The younger partner is more independent, critical and skeptical, the older more conventional and affirmative of social norms. The younger partner, we are told (in the “biographical” information we are given before each conversation), had some desire to pursue interests in the arts or humanities before being forced into a more conventional profession (such as law or medicine). The speaker, then, has both the aesthetic capabilities to “see” something in his/her Mani, while being familiar enough with the more limited outlook of his/her listener, and to know how to make them “see” the same thing, albeit in a more limited way.

Thus, the first conversation is between Hagar, a young woman from a kibbutz, who has met Gavriel Mani, her boyfriend's father, on a trip to Jerusalem, and her mother, Yael, a "typical" kibbutznik still (in 1982) fiercely loyal to the socialist ideals of the kibbutz, and lately adding to this ideological perspective an overly literalistic belief in behaviorist psychology. The second conversation is between Egon Bruner, a budding classicist in the nineteenth-century mold, currently (1944) a German soldier in occupied Crete, and his adopted "Grandmother," Andrea Sauchon, a "typical" representative of the German aristocracy who went along with Hitler in the name of order, anti-Communism, and their own imperialist "ideals." The third conversation is between Lieutenant Ivor Horowitz, a Jewish Englishman serving as a prosecutor in the British force occupying Palestine in 1918, and Colonel Michael Woodhouse an (again) "typical" member of the British aristocracy, who represents the colonial and military norms and codes of the British ruling class. The fourth conversation, finally, set in 1899, is between Dr. Efrayim Shapiro, a skeptical Polish Jewish pediatrician, and his father, Sholom Shapiro, a businessman and enthusiastic Zionist. Central to each conversation are the questions of what, exactly, the primary speaker (who, in each case, is the one who had actually encountered the Mani) sees in the Mani, and what this speaker succeeds (or fails) to communicate to the other partner.

The conversation partner who has actually seen the Mani, I would like to refer to as the "fascinated spectator": in each case, they are inexplicably drawn to the energetic, mysterious, possibly pathological Mr. Mani. There is a strong sense that something "foundational" is at stake, that some kind of singular judgment is called for, and it is this sense that each fascinated spectator tries to communicate. To put it simply, each spectator is witness to a (self-)sacrifice and/or revelation of some kind, whose effects radiate outward to the community, depending upon the ability of the witness to communicate it. Thus, Hagar in the first conversation simply calls upon Gavriel Mani in order to give him a message from his son, but then "slipped into his house uninvited, because I knew I had to find out what was going on in there" (23). She finds a noose in his bedroom, and concludes that Mani (whose mother had just died) was about to take his own life (a reasonable conclusion, of course, but it is just as plausible, as Hagar herself suggests later, that this is some ritual of deferred self-sacrifice). She then stays at his side, despite his attempts to send her back to Tel Aviv, for three days, until the "spell," that is, Hagar's intense conviction that she can and must save him, wears off.

Egon, in the second conversation, becomes so obsessed with Efrayim Mani's (whom Egon is responsible for arresting and deporting along with the rest of the Jews on the island) "theory" of self-cancellation, with the possibility of "return[ing] to the

starting point and becom[ing] *simply human again*" (128), that he spends two years keeping a daily watch on Mani, checking to see whether, when he thinks he is not being watched, he "*cancel[s] the cancellation*" (129). Ivor Horowitz, in the third conversation, investigates with complete thoroughness Yosef Mani's "unbelievably intense" (169) world, first of all because of his scrupulousness as a British officer and a Jew who must prove his loyalty and ability to his superiors, but also because of his extremely alien, seemingly maniacal focus on politics as salvation (and/or self-martyrdom). And Efrayim Shapiro speaks of Moshe Mani's "power" that "could move you to do anything by his presence," a power which is an "illusory reflection . . . of the soon-to-surface destructiveness within him" (267). He finally has to "distan[c]e [him]self in such a way [as to] eventually muster the strength to break the chains of his captivity" (271), to resist the demonic attractive force of both Mani and Jerusalem.

In each of the first four conversations, as well, the question of that Mani's motivation, or driving passion, is left to oscillate between undecidable alternatives: pitiable pathology (or, in the case of Efrayim Mani, simple deception aimed at survival) or genuine revelatory disclosure. Each Mani is either trapped within a determinist historical structure, his vain struggles to escape merely symptomatic reiterations of that structure, or he is exercising an astonishing freedom, in which case the failure is on the part of the spectator and the larger community who are unwilling or unable to respond in kind. Here, the judgment of the fascinated spectator is crucial. For example, Efrayim Shapiro, in the fourth conversation, resolutely insists upon a pathological interpretation of Moshe Mani's ultimate self-destruction: despite what we can take to be his father's objection, he keeps claiming that all of Mani's actions (his energetic self-promotion at the Zionist Congress, his obsessive love for Linka, Efrayim's sister) were all "pretexts" set up to bring about his final suicidal act (he throws himself in front of a train just as Efrayim and Linka are about to separate from him once and for all). The reader is given to see, however, that Efrayim's insistence upon this interpretation is an attempt to evade his own responsibility for the outcome, a responsibility rooted in the skepticism which leads him to dissociate himself from any commitment. Efrayim, 46 years after "successfully" resisting the lure of Jerusalem, "sacrifices" himself at the gates of the Auschwitz death camp. His father, meanwhile, the committed Zionist, later travels to Jerusalem, seeking out the remaining members of the Mani family, in an attempt to "compensate" them, presumably, for the destruction unwittingly wrought in their lives by his children.

4

Hagar, meanwhile, in the first conversation, just as resolutely resists all psychologistic and deterministic interpretations of Mani's or her own behavior,

defending the integrity of her experience and the “revelation” she has witnessed. This mode of accounting for her experience, moreover, corresponds to her actions in relation to Gavriel Mani, whom she quite likely rescued, if not from suicide, then from a repetition compulsion that would have converted his mother’s death into a withdrawal from all meaningful contact with the world. Hagar brings Gavriel into her own family circle, where a romantic connection with her mother is suggested, signifying the “integration” of the Mani family history into contemporary Israel. By bearing his grandson, furthermore, and naming him after her own father (killed in the 1967 war), without marrying his son (who disclaims responsibility for the child) Hagar refounds the Mani family in accord with a new logic.

The originary scene represented by the Mani, in other words, depends upon a spectator. In fact, I want to briefly suggest that this is true of any scene, by definition, including the originary scene postulated by Eric Gans as the origin of language. Mimetic rivalry, I would argue, only makes sense insofar as it takes place in front of a spectator, a court of appeal implicitly able to distinguish original from copy, better from worse and, ultimately, to determine whose actions out of those converging on the sacred object actually “fit” the form of appropriation demanded by that object most “closely.” That this question is crucial to the speculations on justice and injustice developed by Gans in some recent *Chronicles* can be demonstrated in a way that conveniently advances my own analysis and argument here.

In discussing the Israel/Palestine conflict as a case where both parties seem to have equally legitimate victimary claims, Gans seems to arrive at several different (although not necessarily mutually exclusive) conclusions. One is that the Israelis, as the stronger party, have the obligation to take upon themselves the deferral of the Palestinians’ resentment (see *Chronicle* 250). A second is that a certain unilateralism on Israel’s part, in simply claiming Jerusalem as its own, might help move contemporary politics beyond the self-evident legitimacy of victimary claims as such (*Chronicle* 218). As this suggestion also takes for granted Israel’s greater power, I will now suggest a problem with that assumption: it is undermined the more one introduces (as victimary discourses are especially wont to do) various “long-term” and “worst-case” scenarios, such as the acquisition of nuclear weapons by one of Israel’s enemies (or one of the countries that might become an enemy if it had a nuclear weapon), the overthrow of regimes currently at peace (at least formally) with Israel and their replacement by radical Islamist regimes, and so on.

In this case, we are led to consider another model of reconciliation suggested by Gans, despite his claim that it doesn’t apply to Israel/Palestine: that in cases where victimary claims are “equal,” or at least where priority cannot be sorted out “internally,” then the conflict can only be settled by outside intervention. If this

proposal is not simply to generate further resentment (including the resentment of the third party), then it must be possible to presuppose at least the possibility of that party's disinterestedness. It seems to me that only by including the spectator in the originary scene is it possible to account for such disinterestedness. In fact, Gans's first two proposals appear as attempts to include such disinterestedness within the capacity of the stronger party to distance itself from the immediacy of its resentment. It's easy to see how this can only lead to the intensification of resentment on both sides. We can approach the issue more productively, however, if, following up on the outside intervention proposal, we acknowledge that both sides have "always already" taken the spectator into account. Even more, the resentment on both sides is always already *displayed* resentment, intended to register with a spectator—which, I would stress, not only does not imply that it is not "real," but is in fact precisely what makes it real. I don't think it would be very difficult to prove this in the case of either the Israelis or the Palestinians.

This would further imply that the disinterestedness of the spectator depends upon his/her recognition of the scenic structure of displayed resentment (and his/her ability to take into account his/her own simultaneously internal and external relation to the scene). The intervention of the (powerful) spectator can, then, indeed be productive insofar as it is used to break with the fantasy of both sides that the "right" spectator would place them at the center, that is, to impose both responsibility and a certain marginality on both parties (it is the assumption of an "ideal" spectator, for Israel the US, for the Palestinians the UN and "world," especially European, opinion, that, I would suggest, has ultimately made negotiations interminable and impossible). For this reason, I am in fact sympathetic to Gans's support for a bit of unilateralism on Israel's part, which, I would add, must include Israel itself deciding once and for all what it wants its borders to be. That is, Israel could no longer evade responsibility in the name of "their" evasion of responsibility. The other side of the equation might be an American declaration that if the Palestinians formally announce the founding of the State of Palestine, explicitly cutting their ties with all of the rights that, ratified through a long series of UN resolutions, are to be "delivered" to them along with entire state "package," the US will immediately recognize that state. The U.S. would then commence viewing Israeli-Palestinian relations in inter-state terms. I would also suggest that the current campaign against Middle East-centered terrorism might make such an approach productive. The current situation imposes a marginality which is revealed to both parties through their failed attempts to place themselves at the center—for the Israelis, as the "original" victim of terrorism, for the Palestinians, as the party whose victimization is the source of this globally destructive resentment.(5)



In fact, in both the first and fourth conversations, the metaphor of the theater has a particularly prominent role. Near the conclusion of the fourth conversation—just as Moshe Mani takes his final leave of Linka and Efrayim by asserting “We shall never meet again . . . and you are to blame. Do you not see that you are to blame?”—the latter says:

I was still shaking my head when it flashed through my mind that I had made a terrible mistake—that the curtain had already risen—that before me no longer stood a doctor from Jerusalem but an actor forced to recite a script that he could not revise—one drummed into him immemorial ages ago—which—although he was the director and the theater owner too—he was not at liberty to leave unperformed and must stage to the bitter end (284). For Efrayim, the actor possesses only an illusory freedom because the script comes from elsewhere. Insofar as the spectator is unproblematically outside of the scene (merely a “pretext” for the play), that spectator is able to see that the end was included in the beginning, and that beginning itself only refers back to another beginning, which in turn . . . To put it another way, action always presupposes a script, and the script itself presupposes another action, implicitly relying upon another script. In fact, the more control the actor has over the conditions of production (even, or especially, if he is the “director” and “theater owner” as well), the more he is implicated in fulfilling the obligations entailed in the transmitted script, obligations that also presuppose the uninterrogated assumptions and expectations of a passive audience.

In the first conversation, meanwhile, Hagar constantly refers to herself as feeling, during her experience with Gavriel Mani, like a character in a book or a movie, that is, on display. In her case, the setting and the script pre-exist her, but she is unfamiliar with them: she is thus actor and spectator of her own actions, but is not in possession of the “script.” Yet she is also scripting her own story as she proceeds, by extrapolating from her own actions (which also means that she relinquishes her claim to be the privileged interpreter): wrongly believing herself to be pregnant with Gavriel Mani’s grandchild when she goes to see him, she does in fact afterward become pregnant with his grandchild. She is, furthermore, stage-managing other “productions”: to her mother’s crude “Oedipal” reading of Hagar’s interest in Mr. Mani, she says, “Did it ever occur to you, say, that what I’m looking for is not a father for me but a husband for you” (24). In other words, it is Hagar’s appropriation and differentiation of the roles rigidly separated and hardened by Efrayim Shapiro—she is actor, spectator, director, scriptwriter and theater owner at the same time, but in different relations and articulations of these roles—that enables her action to be characterized by freedom and responsibility aimed at reconciliation and a fresh start. She is the only one of the “fascinated spectators” of the novel who actively intervenes in the Mani in question’s acting out of his sacrificial role—who, that is, sends the Mani narrative in a new direction.

I have been suggesting that each Mani operates as a kind of sacred center, from which violence and freedom, sacrifice and revelation, both emanate. Furthermore, the effects, and even the reality, of the sacred center depend upon the reception and response of the fascinated spectator, and, in turn, upon that spectator's relationship to an individual who is implicitly representative of a larger, "mainstream" audience. The truth of the Mani in question thus depends upon the fascinated spectator's ability to transform him/herself into a rhetorical performer who somehow finds a way to convey at least some sense of this truth so as to displace the common sense of the audience. Whatever theory of "identity" or "Jewish identity" the book is arguing for is thus articulated through these relationships. But these scenic elements themselves are rooted in resentment and mimetic rivalry, as I will show through a discussion of the climactic (but also anti-climactic) fifth conversation.

The final conversation is set in an inn in Athens, in 1848. The participants in the conversation are Avraham Mani, Flora Molkho-Haddaya (who leaves midway through the conversation) and Rabbi Shabbetai Hananiaha Haddaya (who, having recently suffered a debilitating stroke, is unable to speak and, possibly, to comprehend). Thus, in this final conversation, a Mani is a participant. Furthermore, the structure of resentment constituting the conversation is for the first time implicated in the fate of the particular Mani in question. Rabbi Haddaya was Avraham's mentor as a young man, and Flora was the woman whom Avraham had wanted to marry following the death of his wife: in fact, before marrying Flora himself (for reasons that are never clarified), the Rabbi had tried to make a match between Flora and Avraham, but she had refused. Moreover, Avraham's son, Yosef, supplanted him in the affections of both. As a merchant who was often away, Avraham often left his son in Haddaya's and Flora's household; as a more talented student than his father, Yosef is more of a disciple to the Rabbi than Avraham could ever be, and as a kind of surrogate son (and/or possibly lover) to Flora, he gains a closeness to her that was never granted to Avraham. The Rabbi, Flora, and Yosef, finally, all treat Avraham with a rather thinly veiled contempt.

6

This, then, is the stage for Yehoshua's presentation of the *akedah* story, "in a reasonable psychological context," that is, one thoroughly saturated with resentment. Avraham has come to the Rabbi in order to seek out a judgment on whether, after having committed the crimes of killing his son and sleeping with (and impregnating) his daughter-in-law, it is now permissible for him to take his own life. His story is an act of revenge against both the Rabbi and Flora: not only has he killed their favorite, the one preferred over him, but in sleeping with Flora's lookalike niece, he has possessed her after all. Furthermore, his story of sacrifice

and self-sacrifice usurps the Rabbi's central position. These motives, presented rather transparently in Avraham Mani's discourse, tend to complicate the question of what he has actually done. Regardless of what is apparently Yehoshua's explicit assertion, (6) it is not at all clear whether Avraham has actually killed his son or to what extent he is complicit in his murder. What is clear is that Yosef, shortly after arriving in Jerusalem, somehow adopted the *idée fixe* that the Arabs of Jerusalem were in fact "Jews who had forgotten they were Jews," and took it upon himself to "remind" them. He embarks on a project of indirect proselytizing (such as recruiting them for Jewish prayer sessions), ultimately arousing the opposition of Muslims and Christians alike. There is a final scene in which, pursued by Christian and Muslim mobs (and Avraham) to the traditional site of the Temple Mount (also the traditional site of the *akedah*), Yosef has his throat slit.

Elements incompatible with Yehoshua's identification of the *akedah* "pathology" with iconoclasm and monotheism are evident here. First, rather than clearly representing (actualizing) the act, his portrayal makes it thoroughly undecidable, or, rather, completely dependent upon the scene reflecting on the original scene. It is quite plausible to see Avraham as taking responsibility for an act he has not in fact committed, precisely because of the way in which it places him in the center of the structure of resentment. Along similar lines, it is possible to see his assertion of responsibility as a result of his guilt over precisely these resentful feelings. Even if we assume that Avraham has killed his son, his resentment provides a radically different and far more plausible explanation than the one Yehoshua has provided for the original *akedah*: to meld "seed and creed," that is, to found a nation on absolute obedience to an all-powerful God rather than on "territory, language and history."

This leads to yet another problem. In Yehoshua's account, Avraham is the one who wants his *idée fixe* transmitted across the generations, realizing that this can only be accomplished through the use or the threat of violence. In *Mr. Mani*, however, Yosef is the one with the "creed," and the one ready to use violence to enforce it: he speaks of the "chastisements" he will use against the Arabs if they fail to "remember" that they are Jews, and he dies for his beliefs. Avraham wants nothing more than the continuation of his "seed," that is, a "normal" family structure. This is the surface reason for his decision to sleep with Tamara, Yosef's young wife, once he realizes that the couple has never consummated their marriage (again, for reasons never clarified: some critics see Yosef as homosexual [see Band, 239-40, for example], which makes sense but to my mind is never confirmed by the text; another possibility is that Tamara's physical similarity to Flora makes their marital relationship in effect the incestuous one that Avraham ultimately establishes with Tamara. I prefer this explanation because it implicates the marriage in the deeply tangled and ultimately unresolved structure of resentments, substitutions and

displacements which the novel insistently suggests lie behind the “ideas” of the Mani men).

In other words, at the moment of truth in Yehoshua’s novel, we find precisely the same antinomies that have been building all along: between pathology and revelation, historical fatality rooted in violence and free action. And the resolution of these antinomies is quite impossible here since the “spectator” is not only an actor in the drama he narrates, but is also the “stage manager” of the scene wherein he narrates it. The structural opposition between Avraham Mani, at the very beginning, and Hagar, at the very end, provides us with one key to making sense of this: whereas Avraham’s violence consists in concentrating all of these roles in his unrecognized drive to place himself at the center, Hagar disaggregates these roles and thus liberates them (that is, liberates the scene) from the sacrificial structure. This suggests the following relationship between the originary scene and sacrifice: sacrifice is a particular response to the originary scene, one that aims at identifying the different parts (actor, spectator, scriptwriter, etc.) with a single, controlling, transhistorical will.

Interestingly, Gavriel Mani has no “ideas,” no “project” (nor is Hagar presented as a character who would be particularly impressed by either): it is as if the “creedal” element of the *akedah* has simply exhausted itself, so that all that is left is the more easily displaced rote repetition of the self-sacrificial structure. The problem here is that this would render Yehoshua’s novel, with all of its national-therapeutic ambitions, unnecessary. The *akedah* story, and its grip on the Israeli psyche, is dying a natural death, just as Zionism, in fact, would have predicted. Yehoshua’s novel is describing the process of normalization rather than struggling to provoke and enact it. This, of course, might only be a problem for Yehoshua’s conception of the novel and his self-conception as an Israeli artist. I would suggest, however, that while Yehoshua’s own reading of the novel in ideological terms (the Enlightenment struggle against religion) is in fact undermined, the novel resituates the problem of the *akedah* in scenic terms: liberation from the *akedah* involves a liberation of the originary scenic elements from their sacrificial structure.

7

The novel’s implicit contention, then, is that the deconstruction of sacrifice is indeed a perpetual necessity.<sup>(7)</sup> This is the case in Yehoshua’s novel, I would suggest, primarily for political reasons. For example, even if we read the first conversation as the accomplishment of normalization, we must take note of the conclusion of the “Biographical supplements” following the conversation. There, we are told that Gavriel Mani preferred to drive from Jerusalem to visit Hagar and Yael through the West Bank, asserting that “the route through Hebron was perfectly safe and the

villagers along it were peaceful" (72). However, "in the early autumn of 1987 [that is, a couple of months before the beginning of the Intifada], a large rock was thrown at the judge's car as he drove through Dir-el-Mana, a village some twenty kilometers south of Hebron. That evening he confessed to Yael that it would be wiser to stop coming via Hebron, even though he felt drawn to that route" (73). Mani might be drawn to that route for pathological, self-sacrificial reasons; a better reading, however, is that, as a descendant of a Jerusalem family, Mani is comfortable with the pluralistic nature of the country and region in a way that most native Israelis would not be. The loss of this "Levantine" consciousness is the cost of normalization, and is closely connected with the intensification of national antagonisms, themselves an important trigger of sacrificial discourse.

Beyond this, Yehoshua's novel is perhaps shifting the debate from normalization vs. singularity to different (singular) positions within the process of normalization. The novel is extremely conscious of the implication of normalization in imitation, which is to say mimetic rivalry, but of a type with an extra double bind built into it: the desire for normalization, if taken literally, assumes that one has already surrendered on the field of mimetic rivalry (one accepts one's otherness as abnormal) while at the same time implying an attempt to now outdo the other at his/her own game. The novel suggests that one need not take this desire literally—that there is an alternative to epigonism, on the one hand, and the intensification of mimetic rivalry to the point of violence or self-destruction on the other.

So, for example, Ivor Horowitz of the third conversation saves Yosef Mani, who is on trial for stealing secret documents and selling them to the Germans while working as an interpreter for the British Army in Palestine (his "payment" is that the Germans allow him access to the Arab population still under their control in order to preach his "precocious" "two states for two peoples" solution to the imminent conflict). He does so, while going out of his way to assert his own "Britishness," by exploiting his interlocutor's British imperial prejudices and even the suspicions of dual loyalty which he knows attach to himself, as a British Jew, in aristocratic and imperial circles. In one instance, he implicitly explains Captain Dagget's (the officer who brought Mani into the British army, thereby giving him access to the documents he later steals) deception by Mani in terms of the Captain's "quintessentially" and eccentrically British "connoisseurship that borders on madness" (181) for horses—thus subtly conferring on his own "outsider" position the authority of objectivity. This courageous political move on Horowitz's part is validated, in the novel's terms, by his support, later in life, for Zionism and Israel. Similarly, even Efrayim Mani's doomed attempt to convince Egon Bruner that he has "cancelled" his Jewishness, that is, to play on the contradictions in Bruner's desire for a pure, unsullied "human" identity and the discrepancy between

“surface” manifestations of identity and its real “content,” manages to save his own family. The more politically responsible characters in the novel, that is, self-consciously perform rather than trying to resolve the antinomy of identity and difference.

This would imply that “normalization” is only genuine and legitimate when it rests upon the scenic revelation that pathological resolutions to mimetic rivalry either suppress or seek to systematize as ideologies. For this purpose, Yehoshua resorts to a transferential strategy adopted by an earlier immanentist critic of Zionist normalization, Gershom Scholem. Scholem’s studies of Jewish mysticism were aimed at confronting the mainstream scholars of the “Science of Judaism” with the originary scene of modern Jewish identity that made their own project possible. In *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, Scholem argued that the Messianism of the Sabbatean and, later, the Frankist sects, which “Enlightened” Jewish scholars considered shameful and “irrational” phenomena to be marginalized at all costs, in fact made the Jewish Enlightenment possible by offering a space of critique of traditional Judaism. Scholem’s aims here were of course political: by stressing the popular, anarchic and potentially revolutionary streams of Judaism neglected by Jewish epigones, he foregrounded Jewishness as a yet to be fulfilled political project with its own integrity.[\(8\)](#)

In this connection, it is significant that Rabbi Haddaya of the fifth conversation is linked explicitly to the Marranos (the Jews who survived the Spanish Inquisition by hiding their Jewish identity, conducting Jewish rituals in secret while outwardly professing Christianity; they were important forerunners of those Jews who adhered to the Messianic claims of Shabbetai Tsvi): he was, as a young man, “accepted into the talmudical academy of Rabbi Yosef Kardo, a descendant of a family of Marranos that had returned to Judaism in the early 1700s” (299). He is also linked to the Sabbateans: as an orphaned infant, he was adopted “by a childless old couple named Haddaya; according to one version, the infant was named Shabbatai for the false messiah Shabbatai Tsvi, who had lived in the previous century but whose remaining followers the Haddayas were connected with” (299).

8

In this case, insofar as we can speculate that Yosef Mani’s “Canaanite” idea of “Jews who have forgotten” and must remember that they are Jews was in some direct or indirect manner gleaned from the esoteric origins and ideas of Haddaya, Yehoshua is drawing a rather direct line from these pre-modern Jewish heresies and the modernist (post) Zionist heresy of “Canaanism.” In both cases, the discrepancy between essence and appearance is the site of the political articulation of identity; and in both cases this “intense,” “foundational” or originary mode of politics

operates upon the mainstream that disavows it, opening the mainstream to new possibilities. It is by opening this space performatively that Yehoshua's novel does, finally, discredit the *akedah*—the Manis are, in effect, a kind of alienation device dismantling the prevailing Zionist narratives of modern Jewish history. And this effect in fact requires that we not be certain of what Avraham Mani has actually done. As I suggested, each possible interpretation of the “climactic” scene refers to another possible interpretation implicating us more deeply in the resentments constitutive of the scene of telling. The novelist, that is, defers the sacrificial structure by offering the reader the scene itself as sign.

Yehoshua's novel, then, has significant implications for originary thinking in the domain of political identity. Eric Gans tends to assimilate political exchange to economic exchange, even if not as radically as many on the right. This also leaves unanswered the question of the status of sacrifice in the contemporary world: Gans's argument that modern art has essentially exhausted its theoretical potentialities follows from his claim that sacrifice no longer needs to be treated ironically (which would involve “taking it seriously”). Does this mean that sacrifice is no longer a threat, and will “wither away” with the further extension of the market? Or that, as a perpetual threat, the best way to defer it is to refuse to take it seriously? In this latter case, does this refusal to take sacrifice seriously also defer the project of reinstituting the originary sign with each act of signification (since this would raise the threat of sacrifice)? [\(9\)](#) In sum, can sacrifice be transcended, once and for all?

I am suggesting that only in the arena of the political can this question be addressed seriously. Politics, in *Mr. Mani*, is where the paradoxical nature of the sign is enacted concretely. It is political action that appears radically free (that is, no causal chain suffices to account for it) from the standpoint of the actor, and radically determined from the standpoint of the spectator. The reason for this is that the political act challenges the spectator to recover the scenic elements revealed in the act. Sacrifice is the failure to take up this challenge by reverting to the categories of stability and continuity that essentially deny the act by constructing a larger, imaginary scene of which the actual scene is a mere repetition. This, in scenic terms (that is, where is the spectator in relation to the scene?), is the basis for the prioritizing of the declarative over the ostensive in metaphysical thought: [\(10\)](#) the spectator refuses responsibility for judging and thereby rearticulating the scene by reducing it to a prior, unchanging, universalizable scene over which the spectator (employing the “long view” available only to the spectator) exercises authority (and authorship). Only in political action is the scene that is referred to (in the political demand or polemic) the same scene as that constituted by the act itself. An expanded space of politics would certainly generate more resentment, and hence make the question of sacrifice more explicit—but might

that not be a precondition for confronting it?

I want to conclude by suggesting that the tendency to forget the institution of the sign (which, after all, makes originary thinking necessary in the first place) is part of the operation of the sign itself—that is, the sign has an irreducibly esoteric structure. Those who imitate the first gesture renouncing appropriation of the sacred object are “set up” by that gesture—they have been disarmed insofar as they *find themselves* imitating a gesture whose meaning they can grasp only after the fact (after they have seen others in turn imitating *them*). It is this anxiety at “finding oneself” that is forgotten by constructing a scene putatively prior to and determining any particular scene; a scene which, furthermore, only the magician or metaphysician has access to from yet another, unseen scene. The unfolding of the egalitarian content of signification generates resentment against such esotericism. Only politics, in the sense I have given it here, can bring that esotericism out into the open, insofar as, in politics, to grasp the hidden intentions or even the essence of the other is simultaneously to constitute a space of accountability wherein those intentions can be placed on a scene that also includes their consequences.[\(11\)](#)

9

### Notes

1. Yehoshua has long been associated with his passionate attacks on the “neurotic” Jewish Diasporic condition and his arguments in favor of “normalization.” [\(back\)](#)
2. In a conversation with the Palestinian Israeli novelist Anton Shammas recorded in David Grossman’s *Sleeping on a Wire*, Yehoshua asserts that “[f]or me, ‘Israeli’ is the authentic, complete and consummate word for the concept ‘Jewish’! Israeliness is the total, perfect and original Judaism, one that provides answers in all areas of life. The term ‘Jewish,’ after all, came into being a thousand years after the concept ‘Israeli’ existed in practice, and it was created to describe a fraction, what remained after everything the Israeli lost in the Diaspora, until he turned into a ‘Jew’” (253-4). [\(back\)](#)
3. See Yaacov Shavit’s excellent study of the “Canaanites,” *The New Hebrew Nation: A Study in Israeli Heresy and Fantasy*. [\(back\)](#)
4. See Mintz and Horn’s essays on the question of historical “alternatives” in *Mr. Mani*. [\(back\)](#)
5. I am setting aside Gans’s argument that “we can tell the Palestinians to stop hating the Israelis and start writing software” (*Chronicle* 218) in the name of what I consider an equally plausible hypothesis—that political reconciliation might be a



precondition of such economic processes. [\(back\)](#)

6. According to Arnold Band, “Yehoshua himself has informed me both in written and oral communication that the father, Avraham, actually killed his own son” (244). Looking at the specific passage cited by Yehoshua, Band, like myself, is unable to see it. [\(back\)](#)

7. Here I am engaging with the issues Gans raises in *Chronicle* 184. There, Gans argues that the “end of the ability of the esthetic to discriminate between the sacrificial and anti-sacrificial . . . liberates the esthetic from the ethical end of justifying sacrifice.” But is this because sacrifice has been internalized psychologically, rather than abolished? Gans is, I think, ambiguous on the implications of this. On the one hand, the capacity to “ironize” rather than “deconstruct” sacrifice suggests that “sacrifice is no longer understood as a necessary feature of social organization.” On the other hand, couldn’t it be the case that the refusal to “take it seriously” really implies an inability to do so; and that the need to ironize it suggest that we have not transcended it? Would victimary discourses have the power they do if sacrifice was no longer a pressing issue? [\(back\)](#)

8. Scholem writes, “I shall endeavor to show that the nihilism of the Sabbatian and Frankist movements, with its doctrine so profoundly shocking to the Jewish conception of things that the violation of the Torah could become its true fulfillment . . . , was a dialectical outgrowth of the belief in the Messiahship of Sabbatai Zevi, and that this nihilism, in turn, helped pave the way for the Haskalah and the reform movement of the nineteenth century, once its original religious impulse was exhausted” (84). [\(back\)](#)

9. Gans writes: “The unique event in which the verticality of human language emerges from the horizontal world of appetite is a moment of liberation re-enacted in every subsequent act of representation. We must *think* our uniqueness that until now only religion has articulated” (1997 Acknowledgements, italics in original). If we must think our uniqueness, then we can also refuse or fail to do so; once originary thinking is available, this refusal or failure becomes a conscious decision. I am suggesting that herein lies a politics intrinsic to originary thinking that goes beyond Gans’s reflections on justice and political economy so far. It is a politics that would involve not only an expanded realm of exchange but what we might call a transparent self-reflexivity regarding one’s point of entry into that realm. [\(back\)](#)

10. See Gans, “Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought.” [\(back\)](#)

11. I am here trying to open a line of communication between originary thinking and contemporary attempts (themselves indebted to earlier thinkers such as Hannah

Arendt, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss) by thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Jacques Ranciere, Slavoj Zizek and others to think politics in more originary terms, *i.e.*, as scenic and paradoxical and hence constituted through “foundational” acts rather than norms. ([back](#))

10

### Works Cited

Band, Arnold J. “*Mr. Mani: The Archaeology of Self-Deception.*” *Prooftexts* 12 (1992) 231-244.

Gans, Eric. *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, 184, 218, and 250.  
[anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views](http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views).

———. “Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought.” *Anthropoetics* II, 2 (January 1997). [anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0202/plato.htm](http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0202/plato.htm).

———. *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment and Other Mimetic Structures*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Grossman, David. *Sleeping on a Wire: Conversations with Palestinians in Israel*. Translated by Haim Watzman. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1993.

Horn, Bernard. “The Shoah, the Akedah, and the Conversations in A.B. Yehoshua’s *Mr. Mani.*” *Symposium*, Fall 1999, 136-150.

Mintz, Alan. *Translating Israel: Contemporary Hebrew Literature and Its Reception in America*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

Shaked, Gershom. *Modern Hebrew Fiction*. Translated by Yael Lotan. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Shavit, Yaacov. *The New Hebrew Nation: A Study in Israeli Heresy and Fantasy*. London, Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass, 1987.

Scholem, Gershom. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

Yehoshua, A.B. “*Mr Mani and the Akedah.*” *Judaism*, Winter 2001, 61-65.

———. *Mr. Mani*. Translated by Hillel Halkin. New York: Doubleday, 1992.