

*Paper prepared for the
5th Euroacademia International Conference
Europe Inside-Out: Europe and Europeaness Exposed to Plural
Observers*

Barcelona, 27 – 28 March 2015

This paper is a draft

Please do not cite

Narrating Europe from the Outside: The Double Peripheral Perspective in Abraham B. Yehoshua's Novel *Molcho*

Judith Müller, Ben Gurion University of the Negev (Beer Sheva)

Abstract

In recent months, two new video clips relating Israel and Europe could be found on the internet: one promoting a shopping center in Tel Aviv and proclaiming that “Europe is here” and on the opposite a new pop song by Doron Madali (lyrics and music) stating that “This is not Europe, here is Balagan [meaning chaos or confusion in Hebrew]”. These simplifying and rather contrasting statements show how difficult and complex the “European issue” is for the identity of Israelis, the Israeli society and its search for a place in the non-European Middle East. In my paper I will exemplify this complexity based on the novel *Molcho* by Abraham B. Yehoshua. The reading of *Molcho*'s voyages to Europe and his struggle with “European culture” in Israel will enable me to analyze *Molcho*'s perception of Europe. The novel reflects two diverging images that are common not only among Israelis, but in the European discourse as well: the nostalgic image of an ideal 19th century Europe and the image of destruction, decline and death that came over Europe during the two World Wars and the Holocaust. I will argue that Europe is presented as a cultural space represented by classical music. This cultural space is not limited to the geographical borders of the European continent; since *Molcho*'s ancestors did not come from Europe he does not even fully belong to the European space within Israel and remains in some way or another a double outsider. Thus I will call his perspective a double peripheral one.

Keywords

Israeli Literature, Europe, A.B. Yehoshua, identity, center and periphery

And this was my way of approaching reality: little by little I discovered the Sephardic element that I had repressed a little and didn't want to touch in my early writings. I discovered the Sephardic element in my own identity and tried to use it as a way to penetrate through to my human soul and to the Jewish experience through my own biography.¹

The story about A.B. Yehoshua's discovery of his own identity is very well known and he talked about it with many interviewers always emphasizing that it was not only the fact that he grew up mainly with Ashkenazic fellows that made him hide his Sephardic background, but a professional decision as well:² he deliberately did not write about Sephardic topics because he knew it would be almost impossible to do so and get accepted to the Israeli literary canon.³ In other words, A.B. Yehoshua took a detour via European modernism. His earlier works are therefore more abstract and highly influenced by writers like Franz Kafka. Only later, when he was already an established author in the Israeli literary scene his style started to shift. According to Gilead Morahg this is not so much a shift from symbolism to realism as was argued before, but rather from *allegorical symbolism* to *realistic symbolism*. Morahg emphasizes the importance to reconsider earlier assumptions since “these works remain well within the perimeters of symbolic discourse and are consistent with the general thematic matrix that has informed Yehoshua's fiction from its outset.”⁴ Moreover, Morahg argues that this shift is highly connected to the expansion of topics in Yehoshua's oeuvre and the fact that his characters become more complex and replace their abstract counterparts we know from Yehoshua's earlier writing.

These stylistic changes happen when he opens himself to Sephardic topics in his stories and novels as well. After his father died, Yehoshua started writing a new novel, *Mr. Mani* (1990). But he stopped, began working on *Molcho* (1987) and came back to *Mr. Mani* only after *Molcho* was finished. In *Mr. Mani* the reader encounters the history of a Jewish family from Jerusalem in five dialogues that take place at different historical crossroads. In other words, we discover five historic moments through the eyes of five generations of Mr. Manis. Although Yehoshua detects in *Molcho* and *Mr. Mani* the experience of the Sephardic Jews as topic, this does not mean, that he leaves Ashkenazic “issues” behind altogether. In fact, especially in *Molcho* it becomes clear that the protagonist is familiar and personally bound to the Ashkenazic society he lives in. This helps A.B. Yehoshua to create situations of confrontation that allow him to question and discuss the Ashkenazic supremacy in Israeli culture but also to discover the Sephardic one through this experience. Furthermore, the publication of *Molcho* opened a similar discussion among literary critics as well:

If the Mizrahi biography of Yehoshua was not considered at all in trying to explain his works before 1987, in the discussion about *Molcho* the Mizrahi past of the author became at once the only explanation of his work and apparently the only place where his writing occurs and derives from in these years.⁵

The novel opens with the last moments of the life of Molcho's wife. She was the one who enabled her Sephardic husband from Jerusalem to get his *entrée billet* to the Ashkenazic circle, or:

When the wife died, he lost 'his identity' that was not his identity from the beginning but the identity of his wife that was forced on him: in love he accepted this coercion or for lack of other option – it makes no difference – and he wanders the world to get himself back his masculinity through a female he will find in the end.⁶

It is first and foremost their love to classical music and the close relationship to Molcho's mother in law that determine the European space Molcho and his wife live in. After his wife's death he starts traveling through Europe. His first trip leads him to Paris and to Berlin and a few months later he takes a flight to Vienna and leaves for Berlin again. Between the first and the second visit Molcho's perception of Europe and its cultural and social spaces in Israel changes. He starts to distance himself from the Ashkenazic part of the society.

Until this very day the gap between the different ethnical groups in Israeli society is visible. Although more and more people from Sephardic background get for example university degrees and the society as a whole sees itself more and more as part of the Middle East, the Ashkenazim remain in some way the European elite of Israel. Not only was Zionism a political movement rooting in Europe, its 19th century history and national discourse but also the first settlers – although mostly not the central European Zionists but rather their Eastern counterparts – came from Europe. It was their culture, heritage and thinking that formed the *Yishuv*⁷ and the young state after its independence in 1948.

Zionism's other was not only the local Arab population, but also the Oriental Jews, the Sephardim that lived in Palestine for generations and especially the Mizrachim, the new immigrants from the Arab countries that arrived in the 1950s.⁸ The roots of this development reach again back to Europe and the Eurocentric worldview as Joseph Massad claims and sums up:

It was by assuming a European 'gentile' or assimilated identity that Zionism could market its colonial endeavor as one of spreading European gentile culture with European Jews as its carriers. In so doing, it engaged in a self-othering project that transformed European Jewish identity in ways never thought possible. Views that used to be attributed to assimilated German Jews about East European Jews and their 'backward' culture were now used against 'Europe's others' in general, whether Jewish or gentile.⁹

The relationship between Israel and Europe and therefore the representation of Europe in Israeli literature is a rather complex one: Not only has the Zionist movement its roots in Europe, also the first steps of modern Hebrew literature have been taken there and therefore the literature was highly influenced by European modernism. Moreover, many Israelis have family roots there and personal memories that are connected to the old continent. There are two contrasting images that form the literary discourse on Europe: the idealized one of a Europe with high cultural values and on the opposite the one of destruction, the Europe of the two world wars and the Holocaust. And after all, Europe is needed as scale and counterbalance in the search for Israel's place and identity in the Middle East or so to say, the Orient.

In this article I want to exemplify this complexity based on A.B. Yehoshua's novel. A close reading of Molcho's voyages to Europe and his struggle with "European culture" in Israel will enable me to analyze Molcho's perception of Europe and the problematic concept of an idealized Europe. I will therefore argue that Europe is presented as a cultural space – in this case represented by classical music. This cultural space is not limited to the geographical borders of the European continent, but even in Israel Molcho is, as Sephardi, looking at European spaces from a peripheral point of view. Thus I will call his perspective a double peripheral one.

Periphery is defined as the non-center and it surrounds the center, but not necessarily in a geographical sense. According to the sociologist Edward Shils every society has a center that is characterized by its central value system and its more or less conform acceptance of an authority,¹⁰ but: "As we move from the center of society, the center in which authority is possessed, to the hinterland or the periphery, over which authority is exercised, attachment to the central value system becomes attenuated."¹¹ Of course this model can be transferred to a trans-societal level as well where the central value system or any other system, like for example a central cultural system of one society seems more accepted, more central or more universal than another. Obviously one problem with a central value system is that it often is presented as the only acceptable one.

In order not to devaluate certain systems, societies, cultures, we need to consider the possibility that their differences are valuable and make them unique. These and similar problems are discussed within a global context by the theorists of postcolonial studies who try to break with the colonial point of view but also show how this perspective has still an impact on how we see different cultures, societies, states etc. or how we define East and West, Orient and Occident. In his central essay collection, *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha examines in various articles culture in a postcolonial and globalized world.¹² He emphasizes the importance of contact between cultures, the central role of ambivalence for its productivity and its hybrid character. We should keep the plurality and hybridity in mind when we now go back to the center-periphery scheme assuming that

there is not only one center with one periphery, but several equally valuable ones and that they can change places depending on the different cultures; meaning the periphery can be the center when we change perspective.

This thought allows me to choose the scheme of center and periphery despite all the mentioned problems, because it resembles at least in some parts the perspective Molcho has, both on European-Ashkenazic culture in Israel and on Europe itself and we will see how this perspective changes through the plot. In addition it resembles the struggle Israel is still in, as Yotam Hotam argues. According to him Israel remains in the cultural perimeter of Europe and therefore is still a foreign object in the Middle East. He continues and argues:

The call to establish an Israeli culture that looks to the East and not to the West is based on Europe related perimetrial thinking. To this end the negation of Eurocentricism by the Israeli society would not be possible without the Eurocentric basis of the critic itself. Hence: One can have the opinion, that it is desirable to come off the European center and to settle outside of his horizon on the way to the construction of a new Israeli society, but this is exactly why it is a misconception to believe in that.¹³

On basis, the overall impression is that our starting point is the assumption that Israel is the periphery and Europe the center, Israel differs from Europe but at the same time relates itself to it and in the same way Molcho is connected to the Ashkenazic society in Israel. I would like to emphasize at this point that I do not define Israel or the Sephardim as peripheral, they only become peripheral at the moment when Europe or the Ashkenazim are seen as the higher one, as the central value system one can be oriented towards. Hence Molcho's view is described as peripheral because he is looking up to Europe and to Ashkenazic culture in Israel. To a certain extent he puts himself at the periphery.

Molcho, as well as A.B. Yehoshua himself, comes from a family that lived in Jerusalem for generations.¹⁴ From time to time Molcho comes back to Jerusalem to visit his mother, but the center of his life is in Haifa where he lived with his wife and still lives with their three children. Like in many Israeli novels, in *Molcho* Europe is described on the one hand as an idealized cultural world, in this case represented by classical music and is on the other hand associated with the brutal end of the dream that this ideal could become reality, the Holocaust. Throughout the years of their marriage Molcho and his wife loved to listen to classical music, they were frequent visitors of the auditorium in Haifa and when Molcho's wife is dying after a long disease they try to find comfort in the sound of a Mahler symphony.

The ideal European place for Molcho is Paris, a city he visited a few times with his wife. After she died Molcho visits her cousin in the French capital; he loves to hear the fine melody of the French language, a reminder of bygone times when French was the *lingua franca* of Europe and brought with it a certain nobleness. Since Molcho visited Paris before, he knows the city, is not a complete stranger and stays at a home-like place:

[...] they dropped him off as well, to stray under a grey sky in the latin quarter, on the open boulevards, at places he knew and loved from the previous voyages, and when they opened the big stores he went from floor to floor to check prices and collect first ideas for presents he would have to bring his children.¹⁵

As we can see here he nevertheless is a tourist, not only because he buys souvenirs but even more so when he takes an organized bus trip to Versailles. Paris is the European metropolis he compares other cities to and he is only satisfied with Vienna when he sees the seafood market that is just like in Paris (293) since "Vienna is only known as some kind of imitation of Paris, and he could get to Paris itself. And therefore the processes need to be shortened as much as possible."¹⁶ Of course Molcho's picture of Paris is euphemistic and his last quoted thoughts came up only a short time after his arrival in Vienna. Moreover, the only thing he discovered so far about Vienna is that the window view from his hotel room is towards little streets and facing a monotone building instead of the boulevard. Paris resembles the Europe of the 19th century a time when European culture and especially the assimilation of Jews in this culture was on the way to its peak. It is a picture of Europe we still try to believe in and many tourists get to see but it is rather one in the European museum of nostalgia than reality.

After Molcho visits Paris he does not fly back to Israel directly but travels to Berlin; it is the first time he visits Germany because his wife never wanted to go back to the place where she was born but had to flee from as a child. Since it is a package tour for opera lovers they play Wagner on the plane, music Molcho probably never heard before since Wagner was an anti-Semite and Adolf Hitler's preferred composer and therefore his music has been banned from Israeli stages:

[...] stormy music was heard in the plane, and all the people sitting next to him recognized it immediately, Wagner, there were cries and they began to discuss the identification of the piece itself, and someone in the front [...] got up and began singing with enthusiasm and everyone clapped and laughed. [...] A frightening feeling of freedom began to flood in Molcho, as if only now the death of his wife became finite and absolute. The plane began to struggle in some wind, and the Wagnerian music tailed off [...]. In the end they came off the clouds and the staggering stopped, and now they floated over a flat and brown land, passing fields and village houses and Molcho was surprised to look also at many cemeteries scattered underneath him.¹⁷

The cemeteries that are embedded in the beautiful and romantic landscape of Europe, especially in combination with the music by Wagner, are a first sign of death in Europe, or more precisely the Holocaust. Nevertheless it is, compared to his second voyage to Berlin, not such an important and central issue. Yehoshua himself explains Molcho's need to travel to Berlin as follows:

'Well,' he said, 'he loved his wife to such an extent that he wanted also to heal her wounds, the source of her cancer, that came in Germany. So he returns to the city of her birth and tries metaphorically to return her to the place from which she was brutally thrown away.'¹⁸

And only at the moment, when Molcho visits the wall at the Brandenburg Gate after he saw the house where his wife was born, we understand how much her personal history becomes part of his own and the wall he was so fascinated by turns into a scar:

The famous Brandenburg Gate was not far at all, actually it is the end of that boulevard. And only a little while later and he already found himself next to it, looking at the wall and the watchtowers that were up close too. He already saw them last winter from the Western side and he liked them very much. Also at this moment his attitude to them did not change and the black Reichstag building protruding from the other side seemed to fit well in this ensemble of overcome terror. This cut, that breaks the German people into two, pleased him very much. An ugly scar that would remain in pedantry to remind even in a hundred years tourists like him what is asked to be forgotten.¹⁹

Although Molcho does not stop to like Berlin, the city does not at all represent the idealized and classical Europe: Molcho cannot enjoy the modern opera he sees there and he is surprised by the casual dress code (92-95), moreover the city seems strange, foreign and to be located in the center of Eastern Europe (97).

After Molcho comes back from his voyage to Paris and Berlin the places are mostly considered as one: Europe. But he starts to distance himself from it, in other words he stops listening to classical music. In a certain way this process starts right after his wife died when he goes to the auditorium he visited with her frequently but cannot get himself to take his seat inside the hall and rather stays outside, listening to a cello concerto by Dvorak, Mahler's 5th symphony and something modern he cannot identify (36-37). The auditorium is one of the "European spaces" inside Israel that characterized the couple's life, or to put it another way: a little *heterotopia* that contains the idealized image of a cultural Europe discussed above.²⁰

Another European space inside Israel is the apartment of his colleague he later travels to Berlin with. Molcho is invited for an evening with her family and he is intrigued by their discussion about orchestras, conductors and choirs in Europe and especially Germany (68). Although he entered the Ashkenazic society he commits that Europe is still foreign "to us" meaning the Sephardic Jews (68). And even though he emphasizes that he has been in Paris several times he after all states that "I am Asian"²¹. A few months later he is visiting a concert with another woman he tries to get to know, but they already leave during the break. It is the period when he already stopped listening to classical music and it becomes clear that he does not feel connected to it anymore (226-231). All he remembers is that they played music by Bach, but not even the real one, rather Carl Philipp Emmanuel (233).

One more such space is the elderly home where Molcho's mother in law lives. Although they are so different, he and his mother in law seem to be close, or more precisely he admires her Yekkishness and is attracted by all the old German Jews living in her elderly home (34-35). Even after years of marriage and living with his in Germany born wife the culture of these old people remains foreign to him, but he pays them a lot of respect and states that it is probably easier to become Christian or Moslem than to become a Yekke (p. 52). Molcho keeps visiting her after his wife's death and invites her to the traditional Shabbat dinner with his children whereas his own mother lives in Jerusalem and does not take part in their family life. When Molcho is slowly cutting of his bonds with the European Jews in Israel and re-experiencing his own Oriental identity his mother in law remains his last connection to his former life with his wife and only after she dies he finally realizes that he is really a "son of this place,"²² meaning the Middle East. After her death and his last visit to Berlin where he tried to close the open wound of his wife, he does not need to maintain his relationship with Europe or any European space in Israel anymore.

To conclude: In this paper I have tried to show how Europe and European culture in Israel are admired by the protagonist of Abraham B. Yehoshua's novel *Molcho* as the cultural center he is drawn to. Although he is married to an Ashkenazic woman he remains at the periphery since he is "Asian". After her death he first tries to remain in "Europe" but finally begins to leave it behind, the fact that he went to Berlin to heal his wife's wound and that his mother in law dies after he comes back help him to cut the last bond. Molcho returns to his Sephardic identity but this does not at all mean that he moves back to the periphery, he rather is reminded of the center of his own identity which is not less important or valuable, it is simply different and less Eurocentric.

Biographical Note

Judith Müller studied Jewish Studies (B.A. 2008-2012) and History of the Culture of the Jews (M.A. 2012-2014) in Heidelberg (Germany), Graz (Austria) and Beer Sheva (Israel). Since March 2014 she is working on her PhD thesis that focuses on the perception of Europe in Hebrew Literature after 1945. Forthcoming publications deal with the topic of bilingual children in Hebrew Literature and the character of the last European in Judith Katzir's novel *Matisse has the Sun in his Belly*.

¹ Bernard Horn, *Facing the Fires: Conversations with A.B. Yehoshua* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 79.

² Ashkenazim are the Jews from European origin and Sephardim come from Spain, North Africa and the Arabic states. This terms are permanently under discussion but since Bernard Horn and A.B. Yehoshua chose the terminus Sephardi instead of Oriental for their conversation, I will use it in this paper as well.

³ See for example Avraham Balaban, *Mr. Molcho* [Hebr.] (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz hame'uchad, 1992).

⁴ Gilead Morahg, "Reality and Symbol in the Fiction of A.B. Yehoshua," *Prooftexts* 2,2 (1982): 179–96, 180.

⁵ "אם לפני 1987 לא נחשבה כלל הביוגרפיה המזרחית של יהושע בניסיון של הביקורת להסביר את יצירתו, בדיון במולכו הפך לפתע עברו המזרחי של המחבר להסבר היחיד של היצירה, ואף לאתר הבלעדי שבתוכו מתרחשת ושממנו נובעת, לכאורה, כתיבתו בשנים הללו."

Dror Mishani, *The Ethnic Unconscious. The Emergence of 'Mizrahut' in the Hebrew Literature of the Eighties* [Hebr.] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006), 133. This and all following translations are mine if not noted otherwise.

⁶ "כשמתה האשה, איבד הוא את 'זהותו', שלא היתה זהותו מתחילה, אלא זהות האשה שנכפתה עליו: באהבה קיבל את הכפיה הזאת, או בליט ברירה – הרי אין הבדל – והוא נודד בעולם כדי להשיב את עצמו את הזכריות שלו באמצעות נקבה שימצא סוף-סוף."

Yitzhak Laor, *Things that are better (not) kept silent* [Hebr.] (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2002), 106.

⁷ The Jewish settlement and population in pre-State Palestine.

⁸ In his paper Joseph Massad concentrates mostly on the problems the Mizrahim faced after their immigration in the 1950s and describes the political and social movements that were born out of this situation. See Joseph Massad, "Zionism's Internal Others: Israel and the Oriental Jews," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25,4 (1996): 53-68.

⁹ Ibid. 55.

¹⁰ Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery. Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 3-4.

¹¹ Ibid. 10.

¹² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹³ "Der Aufruf zur Errichtung einer israelischen Kultur, die nach Osten und nicht nach Westen blickt, beruht auf perimetrialen Denkmodellen in Beziehung zu Europa. In diesem Sinne w're die Negierung des Eurozentrismus der israelischen Gesellschaft nicht möglich ohne die eurozentrischen Grundlagen der Kritik selbst. Daraus folgt: Man kann der Meinung sein, dass man sich von dem europäischen Zentrum ablösen und sich außerhalb seines Horizontes auf dem Wege zur Errichtung einer neuen israelischen Gesellschaft ansiedeln kann, aber gerade deshalb wäre es ein Irrtum, daran zu glauben."

Yotam Hotam, "In the Perimeter of Europe. About the 'German-Jewish' Israeli Society and a Counter Strategy" [Ger.], trans. Elisheva Moatti, in *Zweimal Heimat. Die Jekes zwischen Mitteleuropa und Nahost*, ed. Mosche Zimmermann, Yotam Hotam (Frankfurt a.M.: Beerenverlag, 2005), 108-115. 111.

¹⁴ The family of Molcho's father lived in Jerusalem for generations whereas the family of his mother immigrated in the 1930s.

¹⁵ "[...] הורידו גם אותו לשוטט תחת שמייים אפורים ברובע הלטיני, בבולבארים המפולשים, במקומות שהיו מוכרים ואהובים מהמסעות הקודמים, וכאשר נפתחו חנויות הענק החל עולה מקומה לקומה לבדוק מחירים ולאסוף רעיונות ראשונים למתנות שיצטרך להביא לילדיו."

Abraham B. Yehoshua, *Molcho* [Hebr.] (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz hame'uchad, 1987), 79-80.

¹⁶ "וינה ידועה רק כמין חיקוי לפאריז, והוא הרי יכול להגיע לפאריז עצמה. ובכן, צריך לקצר את התהליכים כמה שאפשר."

Ibid. 280.

¹⁷ "נשמעה במטוס מוסיקה סוערת, וכל היושבים מסביבו זיהו מייד, ואגנר, נשמעו קריאות והחלו מתווכחים על זיהוי הקטע עצמו, ומישהו במושב [...] קדמי [...] קם והחל לשיר בהתלהבות וכולם מחאו כף וצחקו מאוד. [...] תחושת חירות מפחידה הציפה את מולכו, כאילו רק עכשיו נעשה מותה של אשתו סופי ומוחלט. המטוס החל נאבק באיזו רוח, והמוסיקה הואגנרית נחלשה מעט [...]. לבסוף נחלצו מן העננים והתנוודדות פסקו, ועתה ריחפו על-פני ארץ מישורית וחומה, חולפים על שדות ובתים כפריים ומולכו השתאה גם למראה בתי-הקברות הרבים הפזורים מתחתיו."

Ibid. 84.

¹⁸ Horn, *Facing Fires*, 83.

¹⁹ "שער ברנדנבורג המפורסם אינו רחוק כלל, ובעצם הוא תכליתו של הבולבאר. ולא עברה שעה קלה וכבר היה לידו, מתבונן מקרוב גם בחומה ובמיגדלי-השמירה שאותם ראה בחורף שעבר מן העבר המערבי ומאוד מצאו אז חן בעיניו. גם עכשיו לא שינה מיחסו אליהם, ובניין הרייכסטאג השחור המזדקר מהעבר האחר נראה לו מצטרף יפה לאנסמבל האימה שהודברה. החתך הזה, שבו נקרע העם הגרמני לשניים, נעם לו מאוד. צלקת מכוורת ונשמרת בקפדנות שתזכיר גם בעוד מאה שנה לתיירים כמוהו את אשר יבקשו לשכוח." (עמ' 319)

Yehoshua, *Molcho*, 319.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16,1 (1986), 22-27.

²¹ "אני אסיאתי."

Yehoshua, *Molcho*, 71.

²² "בן המקום."

Ibid. 344.