The Wizard of Israel: Amos Oz, Beauty, and Evil

By Samuel Hux (July 2018)

Le Gong, Jan Frans DeBoever, 1936

I seem to think a lot about (as well as of) the Israeli novelist Amos Oz. A couple of years ago, in an essay on the historical ignorance of liberal critics of Israel ("Israel and

the Critics," *NER*, April 2016), I found Oz's book-length essay from 1983, *In the Land of Israel.* Reading this essay was profoundly instructive. Nothing I have read on the Jewish state is better. I recently saw the 2015 movie *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, based on his childhood memoir of 2002, starring Natalie Portman as his mother. Oz is an extraordinarily well-rewarded writer with more than thirty literary awards and counting, so he needs no recognition from me. But I want to give it nonetheless.

His more recent novels show no decline in artistry (unlike what happens to some writers, Norman Mailer for instance, whose work after *The Naked and the Dead* revealed a steady falling-off no matter the consistent ambition and self-regard), but I want to think about a couple of Oz's early books, one of them especially, because I fear they might be lost to public regard, semi-forgotten, ignored given so many Ozian wonders to contemplate. And because, not incidentally, they raise some questions I spent a great deal of time contemplating over several years teaching a course in aesthetics, philosophy of art.

The critic Robert Alter once observed that Oz has a way of using current Israeli concerns in a "mythic drama," of pulling "political actualities into a warp of a mythic confrontation" in a manner which cannot fail to outrage readers. In *My Michael* (1968), for instance, the Jewish heroine avoids middle-class dreariness in fantasies of sex and destruction. She imagines Al Fatah terrorists, two Arab youths she had known as a child, violating her; she imagines them moving across the dark Israeli landscape with incredible natural grace and beauty. "They form one body. It arises firm and gentle as a palm . . . Theirs is a language of simple signs: light touches, hushed murmurs, like a man and woman at love.

Finger to shoulder. Hand to neck. A bird's cry. A secret whistle . . . Their movements bowed and curved, like tender saplings swaying in the breeze. Night will clutch and veil and swallow them in his folds . . . A vicious dagger flashes. A stifled groan . . . I sent them. To me towards dawn they will return. Come battered and warm."

It is absurd to feel superior to stunned Israeli readers. It is always shocking for evil to be evoked in language of great beauty, for evil to carry with it a kind of grace: there is something ostensibly "precious" about this; suspicions are aroused of a deficiency of moral seriousness. That I do not think the suspicions justified—not in Oz's case—is not to dismiss the question. For there will remain, as there always has been, the problem in aesthetics of the subtle and shifting relationships between good, beauty, ugliness, evil, good, ugliness, beauty, evil: what *is* their proper balance?

Should there be such a balance? George Santayana in his *The Sense of Beauty* drew an analogy between the two philosophic disciplines of *aesthetics* and *ethics*—the first about *beauty* and the second about *moral behavior*, arguing in his thoroughly charming way that they imply one another, are in a sense one and the same thing expressed in alternate fashion. John Keats's "truth is beauty, beauty truth" comes to mind. As does Plato's basic belief that only the Good is truly Beautiful.

The question is raised again for me by Oz's *Unto Death* (1971), a collection of two novellas, "Crusade" and "Late Love." Here are two more "mythic dramas" in some way close to outrageous, in which evil is treated with brooding delicacy and the good speaks with sullen awkwardness: two "mythic confrontations" with the nature of anti-Semitism, its mystery. I don't mean

mystery in the sense of “what’s the answer?” but in a rather more awesome sense: tragic, primordial, sickly sacramental . . . Truly it is hard to say—but one experiences it in the reading, especially of “Crusade,” the more masterful of the two. And one learns something of the moral force an author may achieve through the momentary suspension of just anger and through the “inappropriate” beauty and gracefulness with which evil is contemplated.

It is 1096. The year after Urban II—as the historian Henri Pirenne once put it—“sent forth a Europe tremulous with the love of Christ to the conquest of Jerusalem.” Count Guillaume of Touron sets out for the Holy Land with a motley band of followers, his adoptive heir Claude “Crookback” his lieutenant. Things are bad as the crusaders leave: the young countess has just died, the peasants are unruly, the Count is subject to remorse, nameless achings, and has been cursed by the Jewish agent who in the course of a poor harvest “fell under suspicion” and was burned to death “in consequence of his fervent protestations of innocence.” Things will be better upon reaching Jerusalem, unarticulated questions will be answered, revelations vouchsafed. As a child I thought of the “Dark Ages” as literally so: twilight dreary and forbidding, dawn the return of twilight, the day its prolongation. So it is here on crusade. Perfect atmosphere for bone-tiring stretches of monotonous riding, boredom evolving into unrest, unrest becoming paranoid delusions of *something* hovering. Progress is slow although Jerusalem is waiting; peasants are stingy with provisions; camp-following whores are found at daybreak murdered; the Count’s insatiable anguish will not abate: surely, “There is a Jew in our midst.” Those met along the way are ruthlessly murdered, a pogrom in motion; but the Jew in our midst remains undiscovered. Winter comes, ice and rain. Who is the Jew? Claude? The troop’s bard? Someone unnamed? An abandoned and rotting monastery seems refuge from

frozen mud, but becomes instead the scene of starvation, a local plague of sorts. As Death enjoys his feast, the Count finally discovers the “Jew”—and all discover Jerusalem, “which is not a place but disembodied love.”

In “Late Love” we are in Israel after the 1967 war. Sixty-eight-year-old Shraga Unger is a lecturer for the Central Committee of the Labor Party, his one theme the treatment of Soviet Jewry and what it portends: another Holocaust; the Arabs are only scouts. Unger’s style is too florid and European for the young *sabras,* his lectures at the *kibbutzim* attended only by the old and powerless. The committee wants him to retire. But who then will take up his mission with equal fervor? He refuses, he lectures the reader, he dreams of Israeli tanks roaring across Europe, leveling the Nazis, driving the Russians into panic—fantastic retroactive and preventive vengeance. But it’s all impotence, as he knows—a mad quirk. He will retire; the cultural bureau will surely give him a little office where he can do a little translating, the office facing the sea—which he will scan. “I shall always be on guard . . . After all, it is only out of love that I . . .’’ Oz allows Unger to narrate his story; indeed, the narration *is* the story: a voice speaking its anguish. Unger whines, mocks himself: his temper is bad, his gums rotten, his breath foul. He is, inescapably, repulsive physically as he is monomaniacal mentally. Oz takes the risk that the reader will sift truth from the sick narrator, mark the monomania as response to real danger.

The narrator of “Crusade,” when you try to fix upon him, is even stranger, elusive. He occasionally seems a kind of historian: he has access to Claude’s “journal,” which he alternately quotes and paraphrases. Then he seems to have *been* there, one of the Christians: we rode, we rested, we feared.

Then he is there but not *of* them: unseen, a spy, a thief of consciousness. Is he, one occasionally wonders, the undiscovered Jew? But where- and whatever he is, his tone is remarkably restrained, checked, not undone by what he describes. “They began to beat the Jew at noon. Toward evening they branded him with red-hot irons. Then they soused him in salt water . . . and crushed his testicles, as Claude had read in one of the books when he was a boy . . . As the twilight came on they put out both of his eyes, and then, he opened his mouth and asked them whether, if he showed them the place the treasure was buried, they would kill him instantly, and Claude Crookback gave his word.”

In his lectures the old Bolshevik Unger expounds upon “the warm-hearted anti-Semitism” of Old Russia which the Kremlin can draw upon. A “picturesque anti-Semitism, I say, in its way, and in a certain sense almost endearing”: the madness of a people “schooled in vicissitudes,” given to weeping, subject to a “crazy combination of callous cruelty and savage compassion,” who will “tear us apart with their claws, only to get up the next morning and drown in an ocean of agony, remorse, and compassion.” Imagine Dmitri on a leisurely stroll, passing the synagogue. The wailing inside tears at his heart; pity wells for such anguish—so much so that he must “silence the demon sobbing inside his own heart.” He seizes a stone, crashes it through the synagogue window, and “runs away, his heart overflowing with joy and sorrow.”

In “Crusade” a camp-follower sobs over the body of a murdered Jew (that night she will empty his peddler’s sack). Claude, “overcome with a terrible compassion,” walks with the woman, comforts her with soft words and religious sentiments. When, later, a trapped Jewess despairingly hurls her child at the encircling crusaders and rolls in the dust as if in

convulsions, “Claude Crookback struggled with all his might to suppress the sobs rising in his throat. A blind, feverish urge almost forced him to fall to the ground in the dust like her and be trampled on by the soles of her feet . . . Hot tears ran down his beard as he put this she-wolf out of her misery with a short, sharp blow.”

The Count of Touron converses with himself on “the necessity of love.” He dreams of breaking through, fulfillment. When he reaches Jerusalem . . . But there’s a Jew in our midst. The Jew insinuates, “penetrates,” flourishes “in what is most delicate. Like love, like carnal union.” He is the stranger—but often more ourselves than we. Even our language when he speaks it “is somehow suddenly turned to wine.” “Claude,” the Count says to his heir, “you know: why do you keep silent?” And then “in a voice at whose memory my heart is rent with love and terror, ‘Claude—are you really Claude?’” Then, later, the bard Andres singing while snow falls “smothering everything with a kiss of unbelievable tenderness”—“Claude, this piper is not one of us”; and “sorrowfully, as if from a distance: ‘Andres, you are dear to me, you are a dearly beloved Jew, Andres, and I must kill you so that you die.’” Andres silently curls up foetus-like at the Count’s feet. The Count places his spear, sighs, and leans upon it, hesitantly at first, and then harder until it passes through his *own* body “as if clasped in an invisible embrace.” This weird sexual symphony, ferocious and delicate, ends; and the survivors pass on, “leaving behind their loathsome flesh and streaming onward, a jet of whiteness on a white canvas, an abstract purpose, a fleeting vapor, perhaps peace.”

Now, Unger is clearly ironic about “Dmitri.” But Oz treats his crusaders with only the barest irony, with as little contempt as humanly possible, consistently with something surprisingly

like tenderness. The horror of the crusaders' acts is not disguised, not even moderated. But through a remarkable discipline of the imagination Oz suppresses outrage, collapses "the Jew" into the stranger-which-is-ourselves, and, brooding over both self and stranger, orchestrates a symphony of destructive terror and suffering with—as I've tried to show—a kind of stunning grace.

How is one to take this? *My God!* Am I being asked once again to indulge the fetid tripe about sympathy for the poor-oppressor-who-is-as-victimized-as-his-victim? Isn't there a practice of empathy which is positively evil, a sentimental travesty of moral compassion? Such impatience is understandable and justified in some cases: one's impatience for instance with the tourist at Auschwitz, slowly raising his eyes above the scene, gaze of profound revelation, the commemorated dead all forgotten now as he swells with self-congratulation and the grandeur of his trivial compassion, muttering "Pity . . . pity the poor *monster!*"

But such impatience would be misplaced in the instance at hand. We are not being asked to subscribe to that most nonsensical cliché-aesthetics of all, that art transfigures the horror and gives us (all-serviceable word in twentieth-century criticism) "paradoxical" images of beauty even *in* our bestiality. It never does, you know. That's only the feverish pretension to profundity of slithery fifth-rate Dostoevskyans. The horror remains, its fact and history not rewritten, not transvaluated. *Contemplation* may achieve a rare and subtle beauty, a litheness in its movement; but that does not in the least modify the *object* of contemplation. And that's just the point.

For what I have called a “tenderness” in the tone is really, I think, the residue of anguish. Faced with a human insanity apparently beyond the touch of reason, outrage spends itself for a moment so that one can only speak softly. And that soft-speaking is the most painful thing about “Crusade”: mark of the author’s depth, eloquent approximation of the heart’s fatigue.

Samuel Hux is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at York College of the City University of New York. He has published in *Dissent, The New Republic, Saturday Review, Moment, Antioch Review, Commonweal, New Oxford Review, Midstream, Commentary, Modern Age*, *Worldview*, *The New Criterion* and many others.