The Gospel of Amos Oz

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I have been called a traitor many times in my life.
The first time was when I was twelve and a quarter
and I lived in a neighborhood at the edge of Jerusalem.
It was during the summer holidays, less than a year
before the British left the country and the State of Israel
was born out of the midst of war.

Amos Oz, *Panther in the Basement* , trans. Nicholas de Lange, 1997, p.1

A.

Like many Israelis of my generation and slightly older or younger, I read the works of Amos Oz in the order of their publication, book after book after book. In the ninth grade, I studied stories from *Where the Jackals Howl* (*Artzot Ha-Tan*,1965), in the tenth grade, I read *Elsewhere, Perhaps* (*Makom Acher*, 1966) and fell in love with the character Noga Harish, also known as Stella Maris, and at the end of high school I was captivated by Hannah Gonen, the beautiful, cold Jerusalemite from *My Michael* (*Michael Sheli*, 1968), who can, at least to some extent, be blamed for my choice to study Hebrew literature at The Hebrew University. I read these three books in order of publication, but five years after they appeared in print. With the next several books, I caught up and read each one almost immediately after it was published.

The fact that several generations of readers became acquainted with Oz's works near the time they appeared in print influenced their understanding of him. Almost everyone who wrote about his work did so from the perspective of growth, from his beginnings to the point in time when each study was written.[1] Moreover, because Oz was part of the group of authors known as "the first Israelis" and because he was one of the creators and shapers of the Israeli versions of Jewishness and Hebrewness,[2] scholars and critics have tended to trace the trajectory of his artistic enterprise closely—and now that Oz has passed away and we are facing his entire oeuvre, we can say too closely—to the

developmental path of the national enterprise.[3]

Now that Oz has moved elsewhere, I suggest loosening these interpretive shackles somewhat. It is time for us to "privatize" him, to read him as detached, as far as possible, from our collective biography.

How should we do this? I suggest reading him "backwards," from the end to the beginning. That is, from *Judas* (2014), his last novel, to *Elsewhere, Perhaps* and *Where the Jackals Howl*. Next, after the journey back in time through his writings, we will go back even further, to the life story that preceded his literary life. Then, and only then, will we "nationalize" him and discover something new, I hope, about the bond of love and darkness that connects the great author with the "Israeli situation."

B.

Judas,[4] the novel that seals Oz's literary enterprise, addresses, first and foremost, the subject of **betrayal**.[5] At its center is the ultimate Western story of betrayal, Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus, his friend and spiritual teacher.

From the "Gospel of Judas," the present-absent gospel of the New Testament, which Oz undertook to "restore," it emerges, in a seemingly unambiguous way, that Judas did not betray Jesus at all. On the contrary, he was his greatest believer, perhaps even a greater believer than Jesus himself, who, according to Oz's interpretation, actually betrayed Judas. The fact that Judas gave Jesus' name to his persecutors was nothing, according to Oz's bold interpretation, but a product of his desire to promote the great revelatory performance of his great teacher. For, ostensibly, Judas was convinced that Jesus would be easily extricated from his restraints and publicly prove that he was indeed the son of God.[6]

But even if we assume that this was the way things were, that Amos Oz did intend to create a kind of statement of defense of Judas Iscariot, at least two disturbing questions remain open before us. First, what was the point of Oz's pursuit of this hot potato, and second, why did he turn to it precisely in the novel he had decided (and told a number of his friends) would be his last?

One of the answers is, perhaps, that Oz, who was considered the most important ambassador of the Israeli Jewish experience of his generation, felt that he had been charged with the mission of embarking on a final battle of faith, a battle to which his great uncle, Prof. Joseph Klausner,[7] who played a leading role in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, had been committed—to attempt to refute the Christian story that gave rise to blood libels and other atrocities.

Another answer is that the betrayal story or the story of Judas' alleged betrayal of Jesus is actually

the cover story for another betrayal story that is also presented here as the story of an alleged betrayal. This is the relatively marginal story (presented in the novel as expository information regarding the events of the story's present), of Shealtiel Abravanel, father of Atalia, one of the novel's protagonists, who had been a senior partner in Zionist institutions prior to the establishment of the state. However, after expressing opposition to the establishment of the state because he feared such a move would lead to unnecessary bloody clashes with the Arabs,[8] he was relieved of all his duties and labeled a traitor. Hannan Hever,[9] who chose to focus on this story, argues that the way in which Oz chose to tell Abravanel's story, as someone who was labeled a traitor simply because he thought the conflict could be resolved peacefully, "reopens the debate over the establishment of Israeli sovereignty in 1948."[10] He claims as follows:

> Oz challenges [...] the political theology of the State of Israel, a sovereign Jewish political theology which, following Carl Schmitt, can be characterized as analogous to the Jewish God, and as establishing authority … based on a fundamental identification of the state of emergency [which is] fundamentally a state of war in which the enemy—and in the event of betrayal, the internal enemy—is defined as one whose elimination or disappearance is the only way to cope with its threatening existence …[11]

These are two appropriate answers and both can be supported with evidence from other books Oz published in the same period, for example *Jews and Words*, the non-fiction work that he wrote with his daughter, Fania Oz-Salzberger, which was published in the same year (2014) as *Judas*, and his last book of essays, *Dear Zealots: Letters from a Divided Land* (2017). Nonetheless, this answer is derived, again, like many of the things written about Oz, from the complicating relationship that has been woven, almost from his first book, between Oz's story and his community's story, whereas I am more interested here, as I mentioned above, at least as a starting point for a renewed examination of the large corpus before us, in the individual perspective.

From this perspective, *Judas* is a "literary will," a literary document that instructs us how to read the entirety of Oz's great oeuvre. Indeed, if we read Oz's literature and his life story from the end to the beginning, we can clearly see that the main theme of his world has always been **betrayal** and that his fundamental strategy was to create parallels between betrayal at the individual level and huge social and cultural betrayals. In other words, Oz's stories are characterized by the hyperbolization of the pattern of betrayal, which is, I believe, the thread that connects the chapters of his life and the various divisions of his literary work. In this respect, *Judas*, Oz's last novel, is "only"

the most overt and obvious manifestation of his obsessive preoccupation with this subject and those that derive from it. Reading all of Oz's writings through this thematic prism exposes the logical basis of his developmental path, reveals the nature of the reciprocal relationship between his prose and his literary and political essays, and also explains the nature of some of the literary devices that have been some of the hallmarks of his narrative art.

C.

Nonetheless, when we attempt to extract from Oz's "literary will" a clear statement on the subject of betrayal, we encounter obstacle upon obstacle, also because, in the words of the Jesuit Father David Neuhaus,[12] "in Oz's novel *Judas*, everyone betrays everyone," a redundancy that creates an analogous explosion on which it is very difficult to impose order, and, in addition, because Oz's statement in defense of Judas Iscariot is a convoluted literary-legal document from which it is impossible to extract a clear statement of intentions. Oz dances around the issue of betrayal like a moth flitting around a burning lamp. He attempts to represent Judas' betrayal of Jesus as a demonstration of absolute loyalty, but his dissenting mechanism is so convoluted and hyperbolic that it is impossible not to conclude that he has mustered all his literary juggling tricks, spectacular in and of themselves, so that he can touch, once again, the fire of betrayal, which he hates, of which he is in awe, but which he passionately desires. It must be noted that he approaches it not with bare hands, but, to paraphrase Paul Valéry, with gloves of logic, by means of the logic of literary fiction. Doing so protects him from severe burns, but also prevents complete contact, so Oz's passion for the "burning bush" of his life persists and recurs.

It must be noted this was not the first time that Oz made this *salto mortale*, this deadly jump, under literary laboratory conditions. A similar trick lies at the heart of the defense he wrote regarding another traitor. I refer to his statement in defense of Hirshel Horovitz, the protagonist of S.Y. Agnon's *A Simple Story*. Almost everyone who has read and written about this exemplary story has believed that Hirshel betrays his lover, Blume Nacht, his romantic night flower, because he succumbs to Tsirl, his greedy and domineering mother, and marries Mina, the boring daughter of wealthy parents.[13] Only Amos Oz, in the chapter "Stolen Waters and Bread Eaten in Secret: A Reading of *A Simple Story*," which was included in his book on Agnon,[14] claimed that such things never happened, and provided black-on-white evidence to support his argument. The whole issue in *A Simple Story* is, he claimed, that Hirshel is neither a submissive nebech (unfortunate person) nor a young man who has lost his sanity. In fact, he is a brilliant trickster, and his goal, from the beginning, is to betray his lover with his wife, a move that he makes with great virtuosity.

The common denominator of these two statements of defense, impressive in their blatant unfoundedness, is the carousel mechanism that allowed Oz to continue to spin around in the same endless circle, to move again and again from damaged love to abandonment, betrayal, the desire for revenge, feelings of guilt, and back again.

D.

Reading Oz's monumental autobiographical novel, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2002) against the backdrop of *Judas*, which was published twelve years later, one might get the impression that in the earlier work Oz actually managed to touch the fire—the event of the suicide/betrayal of the mother—with hands that were more exposed. He did so with no need for the gloves of literary logic that he used in *Judas*, that is, without the displacement of the personal wound to the historical-religious mega-trauma (Christian–Jewish relations), and without excessive or exaggerated thematic and rhetorical twists.

This, however, is also a mistaken impression. While in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Oz, from the beginning of the novel, makes an implied "contract with the reader"—different from the written "contract with the reader," in which he instructs us how to read the novel,[15] we eventually receive a key that allows us to peer into the depths of the complex soul of his mother, whose enigmatic and melancholy personality fills the space of the novel like a kind of black sun, to use Julia Kristeva's brilliant term for depression and melancholy,[16] and perhaps, then, into the soul of her son, her main victim. But he is unable to fulfill this agreement. Although at the end of the book he allows us to accompany the mother on her last day, as we can see from the following quote, here, too, Oz needed—understandably and heartbreakingly—a hyperbolic protective suit:

> My mother ended her life at her sister's apartment in Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv, in the night between Saturday and Sunday, January 6, 1952.[17]

This is the private, personal story. But Oz continues and writes the following in the same paragraph:

> There was a hysterical debate going on in the country at the time about whether Israel should demand and accept reparations from Germany on account of property of Jews murdered during the Hitler period. Some people agreed with David Ben-Gurion's opinion that the murderers must not be allowed to inherit the looted Jewish property, and that the monetary value should

> definitely be repaid in full to Israel to help with the absorption of the survivors. Others, headed by the opposition leader Menachem Begin, declared with pain and anger that it was immoral and a desecration of the memory of those who had been killed that the victims' own state should sell easy absolution to the Germans in exchange for tainted lucre.[18]

What a comparison is created here. On the one hand we have the father and the son, the victims of the mother's act, and on the other—on a hyperbolic scale similar and parallel to the scale of Judas' betrayal of Jesus—the victims of the Nazis. The mother's suicide is thus seen on a mythic-historical scale. It is portrayed as a deed of absolute evil carried out by someone who has absolute power over a helpless human being.[19]

But, here too, Oz's attitude toward the issue of abandonment/betrayal is not unequivocal. This is made apparent by two rhetorical moves. The first of these is the way in which the narrator reports the mother's death. He does not say that the mother committed suicide or put an end to her life or risked her life, and the like, all worn out clichés. Instead, he uses a strange phrase—"ended her life" (in Hebrew, the phrase is literally "stopped her life", *hifsika et chayeyha*), which is not the usual way of saying "committed suicide")—as if the mother were some sort of electrical device that could turn itself off by flipping a switch or pushing a button. And this is a deceptive phrase that echoes poet Dahlia Ravikovitch's lines: "On the road at night there stands the man /Who once upon a time was my father ..."— bursting with a whirlwind of horror, longing, empathy, and wrath—an emotional storm impossible to curtail.

The second move, which further complicates the picture, is the way in which the two opposing positions on the issue of reparations from the German government are presented. Oz presents the stances of Ben-Gurion and Begin as equal. This means that for him, no decision has been made. Fifty years after his mother "ended her life," he has failed to decide between the feelings of pain and rage, the inability to understand and forgive, the feeling that any other response is an unpardonable violation of taboo, and the understanding that the survival of the soul requires another economy, the kind that opens a door to a moratorium.

E.

Eleven years before *A Tale of Love and Darkness* was published, Amos Oz published his book *Unto Death*,[20] which features two novellas, *Late Love* and *Crusade*. The novella *Late Love* is a confessional monologue by Shraga Unger, "a veteran traveling lecturer for the Central Committee,"[21] who, for many years, goes from kibbutz to kibbutz and lectures, as he puts it, on

his "one and only subject … Russian Jewry."[22] *Crusade* is a historical novella about the journey of a group of crusaders to the Holy Land at the end of the eleventh century.[23] Leading the group of crusaders are the aristocrat Count Guillaume de Touron, who "headed toward the Holy Land, to take part in its deliverance and so to find peace of mind"[24] and "Claude, nicknamed 'Crookback,' [who] was a distant relative of the Count and had grown up on his estate."[25] Claude accompanies the crusade with his records, which are peppered with the words of the narrator, or more precisely—and I will touch on this issue below—in the words of the narrators who take part in the story.

The juxtaposition of these two novellas, so different in terms of the space and time of the events described in them, astounded the critics.[26] Some claimed the two works had a metapolitical common denominator. Gershon Shaked did this in the chapter he dedicated to Oz in *Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880–1980*:[27]

> The most interesting of Oz's novellas written at this time . . . is *Crusade*, which appeared some three years after the Six Day War, coinciding with the metapolitical novella *Late Love,* which is a parodic-satirical response to the euphoria period that followed that war. *Crusade* can also be understood as a reaction to the Six Day War and the Holocaust, which public opinion linked with the Six Day War. . . . The novella may also have a different meaning. One might presume, perhaps, that there is an intertextual connection between it and Yehoshua's story "Facing the Forests." The main character in "Facing the Forests" is a Jewish student . . . who identifies with the crusaders and identifies the Arabs as the Jews of his day or as Arabs who are dealing with the crusaders. Yehoshua leaves open the difficult question of the fate of the modern crusaders who conquered the Holy Land and settled on the ruins of an Arab village. And here we return to Oz's novella and ask whether the new crusaders contain the same cruelty and the same forces of self-destruction and decadence. The Jews were the victims of the Crusades. Are Israelis as crusaders making a sacrifice?[28]

Gershon Shaked's attempt to identify a metapolitical common denominator between the two works seems to be forced, and constitutes an additional link in the tradition of reading Oz's works (and those of other Israeli writers) through the lens of the Zionist metaplot or through the lens of stories whose sole purpose is to attempt to undermine it. The question that Shaked asks is, in fact, whether Oz's novels confirm the national narrative or shatter it.

In my humble opinion, and in light of the reverse reading of Oz's writings, the common denominator of the two novellas, so seemingly dissimilar, is different, and coincides with the

common denominator that links all the works we have already addressed—the compulsive preoccupation with betrayal by means of hyperbolic consequences.

Shraga Unger declares, as mentioned, that his sole subject is Russian Jewry, but he, like all of Oz's narrators in the 1960s and early 1970s, is unreliable.[29] His complex monologue makes it clear that it is not Russian Jewry that is his only subject, but the terrible conspiracy that the Russians are plotting against the entire world. He is convinced that the intention of the Bolshevik Russians is "to first annihilate the Jewish people in order to later destroy the whole world."[30] In the meantime, "they are content with terror, persecution, decrees, humiliations, and verbal abuse. But after all that's exactly how Hitler began."[31] Unger vows to "travel from kibbutz to kibbutz and from Jew to Jew, to sow the seeds of truth in every heart."[32]

A special place in Shraga Ungar's conspiracy theory is occupied by his emotional-intellectual fixation on the notion that his surroundings are full of people who are collaborating with the Russian schemers. These are everywhere, even in his workplace:

> Now something is happening to me. They are trying to get rid of me. That is, the people who run the Cultural Bureau are in on the conspiracy. Perhaps they have had instructions from higher up. There are **foreign agents** everywhere, I know there are.[33]

Amos Oz called this novella *Late Love*. This is an ironic title that refers to the end of the story, in which Shraga Unger tries to form an alliance with the only woman with whom he has ever had a relationship and her current partner, who is portrayed in a ludicrous manner. But this unusual triangular alliance fails even before it begins to take shape, because Shraga Unger cannot trust anyone. Why? Ungar himself reports on this only once in one of his impassioned-hallucinatory monologues:

> Beyond the farthest edge of the plains, beyond the dark forests, beyond the taiga, the tundra stretches right up to the limit of the glacier wall.
>
> Someone is waiting for you. Come. Your time is running out. Get moving. Shraga. Come on.
>
> Na! Leave me. Do you really think that I am capable of going?
>
> I don't even feel confident. Perhaps it is a fraud. I won't budge. Once I was caught by a **gigantic fraud, robbed of all my youth, I won't allow myself to be caught a second time. I'm not moving**.[34]

Unger does not specify what this deception is. Is it an ideological deception or is there a personal, family or romantic background? Either way, the mental pattern is clear: mistrust based on the wound of a deception from childhood is projected onto the world in a hyperbolic way. The global plot of Bolshevik communism, to which Shraga Unger has shackled himself for life, is a magnification of the burning bush from which the author constantly attempted to escape and to which he was relentlessly drawn.

Late Love is a monologue that begins with the presentation of the tough façade of Shraga Unger, who presents a world-encompassing, rigid, and unequivocal conspiracy theory, but he becomes weak and deteriorates, as he explains: "And so finally I arrive at the bottommost depths of my thoughts."[35] "I am gradually coming to terms with the idea of giving up. I must accept a compromise."[36] He gives up both his mission as a whistle blower and his fantasy of reuniting with his former partner and her current partner as a shelter for history's refugees. However, he too like all of Oz's protagonists, cannot really keep away from the everlasting fire that kills and revives him. Immediately after presenting his dream of retirement, the demon of suspicion and betrayal returns to harass him and he returns to his evil ways:

> I'd like to have a little office of my own, with just a desk and a chair, here in the Central Committee Building, and specifically on one of the upper floors. I want to be able to glance up from my work occasionally and look out at the sea. And so the sea breeze can reach me through the open window. It's not an unreasonable request.
>
> And under my breath, I shall add:
>
> I'll buy a pair of powerful binoculars.
>
> When no one is looking I shall scan the horizon. I shall always be on guard. For as long as the reprieve lasts I shall participate fully. Just like everyone else. But when the gray ships appear over the distant horizon, I shall be the first to raise the alarm. I shall raise the alarm with all my dwindling strength, raise it with my dying gasp. With the last gasps of my love.
>
> After all, it is only out of love that I—
>
> And here is the brink of silence.[37]

The novella *Crusade* is a dark expressionist version of the novella *Late Love*, and it attests to the fact that early on in his work Oz made structured and sophisticated use of the inherent tension between Christianity and Judaism, which he always shapes as a fierce struggle within the "family myth,"[38] and which revolves here, as it does in *Judas*, around the issue of redemption and betrayal.

In *Late Love* the dramatic monologue is replaced by the story of the journey of a group of crusaders who are making their way to Jerusalem to redeem it from the Muslims and find salvation for their tormented souls. As in *Late Love*, in *Crusade* too—despite what one might expect from the obvious differences between the connotations evoked by the titles of the novellas—every event is marked by disintegration and collapse at the level of the collective mission (none of the group's members get to Jerusalem) and in terms of both the group's cohesion (most of them end up dead or injured) and the ultimate goal—no one achieves any kind of salvation.

The process of disintegration in *Unto Death* is reflected—again, similarly to what happens in *Late Love*—in the breakdown of the narrative authorities. Nurit Gertz,[39] who examined this novel based on Oz's previous stories, aptly stated the following:

> The breakdown of the narrators, which occurs in most of Oz's other works, is particularly noticeable here, because there is a clear distance between the protagonist-narrator, who writes the records (Claude), and the narrator who reproduces these records and between the narrator-reproducer and the author and the reader. The distance is also a distance of time and history, a distance of religion and nationality, and a distance of moral values. And here, when authority after authority is dragged into the vortex and loses its reliable neutrality, it is revealed that beyond these distances, everything is different. These are all one thing: history, religious gaps, moral systems, everything collapses in the face of a distorted reality that the narrators are unable to judge and within which the characters cannot operate.[40]

I agree with Gertz's observation regarding the complete collapse of the narrative authorities in *Unto Death*, but I do not agree with her assertion regarding the identity of the factor that causes it. It is not the distorted reality that undermines the ability of the narrative consciousnesses, but rather, on the contrary, the distorted consciousnesses (some even explicitly lose their sanity) that prevent any possibility of the coherent representation of reality.

The question that needs to be asked in this context is, it seems, what are the mental and/or emotional components that undermine the parties involved, impair their view of reality, and neutralize and eliminate the possibility of national and spiritual salvation?

The answer is the experiences of abandonment and anxieties of betrayal, as in *Late Love*, a paranoid tinge—annoying feelings that plague de Touron, accompanying him and his companions like a shadow on their journey through the cold and dark expanses of late eleventh-century Europe.

Early in the novella, Claude chronicles the events that preceded de Touron's decision to abandon

his home and estate and join the Crusades: "'At the beginning of the spring, he writes, in the year of Our Lord's Incarnation 1096' . . . 'our young mistress Louise of Beaumont showed the first signs of falling sickness, the very disease which had carried off her predecessor two years earlier.'"[41]

Count Guillaume de Touron attempts to offset the evil of the decree—the loss of his wives, neither of whom had "'presented him with a son and heir,'"[42] through "'constant silent prayers and fasting'"[43] but, according to Claude, "'[w]hat is done is done and there is no going back.'"[44]

Immediately after the death of his second wife, a man suspected of fraud and betrayal of the master is found among the people of the estate, a Jew of course, who "'in consequence of his fervent protestations of innocence,'"[45] is put to death in a fire. Thus, the traitor in the camp is removed and everything should have gone back to normal. But things turn out differently, according to Claude's report:

> The spectacle of the burning of the Jew might have served to dispel somewhat the anxiety and depression which had caught hold of us since the spring, but it so happened that the Jew, as he was being burnt, succeeded in upsetting everything by pronouncing a violent Jewish curse on Count Guillaume from the pyre.[46]

The next passage opens with the words, "'In the course of the summer our lady's condition grew worse and she began fading toward death.'"[47] The parallel created by the juxtaposition of these two passages implies that the death of the lady is the result of the curse of the "deceitful" Jew.

After the death of his wife, Lord Guillaume de Touron embarks on a crusade driven by "a blind and stubborn bond [between] the words: 'to redeem,' 'to be redeemed,' 'to set fire,' 'to go up in flames'."[48] Guillaume and his men advance on roads and margins of roads burning in the world and in their souls everything they perceive as a sign of the forces of sin/impurity/evil. However, they are constantly accompanied by the feeling that someone is lying in wait, that there is a traitor among them. In other words, a Jew: "Is it possible perhaps that a Jew has insinuated himself into our ranks by stealth?"[49] Count Guillaume de Touron constantly follows this traitor/Jew, but he finds it difficult to identify him because, according to his understanding, as one of the narrators reports, this is an abstract phenomenon:

> He surveyed his men, every single one of them, their expressions and gestures, eating, at play, in sleep, and on horseback. Is there any reason in looking for signs in the sensible sphere? And what is Jewish in a Jew – surely not any outward shape or form but some abstract quality. The contrast

> does not lie even in the affections of the soul. Simply this: a terrible, a malignant presence. Is not this the **essence of treachery**; to penetrate, to be within, to interfuse, to put out roots, and to flourish in what is most delicate. **Like love, like carnal union**. There is a Jew in our midst. Perhaps he has divided himself up, and insinuated himself, partly here, partly there, so that not a man of us has escaped contagion.[50]

The cat is out of the bag. Treachery is like love, and perhaps treachery is love and love is treachery. It is therefore no wonder that all the narrators in the novella enter one another's domains and take over one another's voices, until, as Nurit Gertz[51] has shown, the whole narrative framework of the novella collapses.

In *Unto Death*, the collapse of the narrative framework is impressively dramatized. The crusaders are no longer able to cope with "the hidden presence of a malicious element which had insinuated itself"[52] among them and in attacks of paranoia eliminate anyone who, even for a moment, appears to them to be "'a wolf among God's flock.'"[53] The only thing keeping them from themselves is the music of "Andrés Alvárez, the piper, [who] played … merry tunes on his pipe."[54] But when they come to "the far distance"[55] the thought that "perhaps Andrés is the hidden Jew,"[56] goes through Guillaume de Touron's mind, and he informs him of his intention to kill him: "'Andrés, you are dear to me, you are a dearly beloved Jew, Andrés, and I must kill you so that you die'."[57] Andrés's death means the cessation of the melody of life and the silencing of the voice of the artist who had become an integral part of the community of salvation seekers that also includes violent robbers, murderers, and traitors. Indeed, immediately after the death of Andrés (who falls on his spear), Count de Touron also dies, and the few surviving crusaders lose their tangibility and become "a jet of whiteness on a white canvas, an abstract purpose, a fleeting vapor, perhaps peace."[58]

F.

Our journey through the land of Oz through the eyes of Lot's wife or through Walter Benjamin's view of history also changes the vantage point from which we read the novel *My Michael* (1968), the masterpiece thanks to which Oz became a world-renowned author.

Oz named this book *My Michael* after Michael Gonen, the pale-figured husband of Hannah Gonen. Zeruya Shalev,[59] in the beautiful afterword she wrote for the edition of the novel published in honor of the fortieth anniversary of its first appearance, achieved, from her point of view, "historical justice" by titling her essay "My Hannah." Hannah, she says, is the protagonist of the book due to her uniqueness in the pantheon of the great heroines of the European novel, Anna Karenina, Effi

Briest, and Emma Bovary,[60] because she, unlike them, does not express her desire for other men, but rather "looks out of the window like a stone princess, devoted to no one, letting her desires live their eternal life beyond the body and its boundaries, beyond time and place."[61]

I understand Zeruya Shalev's admiration for Hannah Gonen, but when we read this book after reading its younger siblings, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and *Judas*,[62] we cannot help but adopt the perspective of Yair, Hannah and Michael's son, who is fated to serve as a mediator between them during their lives and after their deaths (and I doubt whether any of the book's readers remember his name). He is a boy whose father describes him as "never complain[ing]"[63] and "entirely self-sufficient"[64] and whose mother refers to him as "[a] clean and careful child; a balanced child."[65] In my reverse reading of Amos Oz, I call this book *My Yair*, since Hannah Gonen belongs to no one and the phrase "my Michael," which is what she calls her husband, is meaningless. On the other hand, the phrase "my Yair" expresses the cruel impression of the words "self-sufficient," "balanced" child, suggesting that he is, in fact, a child who does not receive love and will find it difficult to love.[66]

Let us go back another step. One of the most prominent poetic features of Amos Oz's early fiction—first *My Michael* and then *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, and finally *Where the Jackals Howl*—is the unreliable narrator who functions as a spy, or, more accurately, as Oz himself noted many times, as a double agent.[67]

What was the point, I have wondered not once or twice, of Oz deciding to home in on the spy/double agent position, a position that found its early and successful poetic expression in his Janus-faced narrator, who openly serves as the representative of his community, but secretly hates it, wishes for its downfall, yearns for a disaster to befall it, for rape, for murder. And remember in this context, for example, the narrator of the story "Nomad and Viper," from *Where the Jackals Howl*, and Reuven Harish, the official tourist guide of Kibbutz Metsudat Ram in the novel *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, between whose words of praise for his community burst forth voices of protest and bitterness and a desire to avenge and cause harm.

*

When we take another step backwards, to Oz's life story, it is difficult not to connect the position of the double agent to his biography. My intention is not to examine this point in depth, but I believe that we cannot ignore the fact that it is impossible not to notice that betrayal is the formative event that feeds this tale of love and darkness. I will only note here the relevant biographical facts from the end to the beginning. When Amos Oz was fourteen, he left his home in Jerusalem and moved to Kibbutz Hulda. He also changed his name from Klausner to Oz. Two years earlier, in 1952, his

mother, Fania, had committed suicide. In the previous twelve years, Oz had grown up in Rehavia, and earlier in Kerem-Avraham, in a distinctly "Klausnerish," revisionist home.

Oz's moving to Hulda and changing his family name is described by him in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, and in several key interviews, as a clear act of betrayal. Oz responded to the act of abandonment and betrayal of the mother in an act that replicated abandonment and betrayal. In changing his family name and moving to the kibbutz, he exacted revenge on his father, who had experienced the taste of betrayal for many years during which his wife was disconnected from reality much of the time. On the other hand, Oz never succeeded in exacting revenge on his mother. As I have attempted to show, every time he came close to this fire, he was captivated by its deceptive charm, succumbing to the immense intensity and petrifying power of destruction.

Amos Oz wrote and spoke many times about the difference in his attitudes to life and literature. In literature, he preferred, he wrote, the twilight, in life the blazing blue light, in literature Jerusalem, in life Ashdod, and so, among other things, he preferred as a leader the monotonous Rabin over Dayan, who seemed like a character from a dark novel. But, in fact, the boundary between Oz's literature and his life was blurred. At least in his literature there was no real demarcation between Mina and Blume, between Jerusalem and Arad, and between dying and conquering the mountain—the messianic revisionism on which he was raised at home—and another goat and another dunam—the labor movement doctrine he absorbed at Hulda. As a person, he always simultaneously belonged and did not belong, and more than once suffered from being called a Judas. As an author, he used to the fullest his perfect "not belonging" to move back and forth between different and contradictory positions—spy, double agent, a tightrope walker who refined his art, and more, until sometimes it was possible to sense that he was having trouble finding solid ground under his feet. And yet, and this is the great paradox that brings me back to Amos Oz in the national context, he served us as a kind of lighthouse—how?[68]

I will say this very briefly. In my humble opinion, Oz's bipolar DNA and the double agent position that stemmed from it and that he wove so marvelously into words, reflects our DNA as a collective. After all, whether we admit it or not, we are a nation torn between messianic revisionism and the "Mapainik" attempt to create a sane life. Revisionism is full of fervor and the glory of honor but is also hysterical and suicidal. The ethos of the labor movement is replete with principles of reality, but the life it offers sometimes seems to us, perhaps against the backdrop of the mega-powerful historical traumas we have experienced for centuries, like everyday life as seen through Hannah Gonen's eyes—tawdry . . . like an imitation of an imitation of something. And we are repeatedly tossed back and forth between these two poles. And every act of choice between them gives rise to

avalanches of feelings of betrayal and guilt, outbursts of anger and wrath and helplessness. Amos Oz was then, both in his life and in his work, the refined and wonderful expression of the not-so-simple story of us all.

Ofakim, November–December 2019

Notes

1 Oz received, beginning with the appearance of his second novel, *My Michael* (1968) when he was not yet thirty years old, and particularly after the publication of *The Hill of Evil Counsel* (1976), which includes three novellas, a flood of reactions that examined his work from the position of a kind of interim summary, which also served, because Oz was already considered one of the two most important writers of the time—the other was A. B. Yehoshua—as an interim summary of all his contemporaries in Israeli literature. These included not only notes, essays, and articles, but also major chapters in books, which were written from a generational-synoptic perspective, as well as monographs. See, e.g.,

גרשון שקד, *גל חדש בסיפורת העברית, מסות על סיפורת ישראלית צעירה* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1971); הלל ברזל, *מספרים בייחודם, סיפורת ההווה–עיונים בדרך ההשוואה* (תל אביב: יחדיו, 1981); נורית גרץ, *עמוס עוז: מונוגרפיה* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1980); הנ"ל, *הסיפורת הישראלית בשנות השישים* (תל אביב: האוניברסיטה הפתוחה, 1982 – 1983), יחידות 3-3, 1–83; הנ"ל, *חירבת חיזעה והבוקר שלמחרת* (תל אביב: הוצאת הקיבוץ המאוחד, 1983); אברהם בלבן, *בין אל לחיה, עיון ביצירות של עמוס עוז* (תל אביב: עם עובד, 1986); הנ"ל, *אל הלשון וממנה, לשון ומציאות ביצירת עמוס עוז* (תל אביב: עם עובד, 1988).

2 תום שגב, *הציונים החדשים* (בסדרה *הישראלים*) (ירושלים: כתר, 2001).

3 See, for example:

יצחק לאור, *אנחנו כותבים אותך מולדת* (תל אביב: הוצאת הקיבוץ המאוחד, 1995), 76–104; גרשון שקד, *הסיפורת העברית, 1880–1980 [ה] בהרבה אשנבים בכניסות צדדיות* (ירושלים ותל אביב: כתר הוצאה לאור והוצאת הקיבוץ המאוחד, 1998), 205–229; יגאל שוורץ, *פולחן הסופר ודת המדינה* (תל אביב: דביר, 2011); דן לאור, "במחוזות הזיכרון: ביוגרפיה, אידיאולוגיה וסיפור בכתיבתו של עמוס עוז", *ישראל*, 7, אביב תשס"ה, 2005, 39–25; אניטה שפירא, "'הסיפור הציוני' של עמוס עוז", שם, 163-171;

Eran Kaplan, "Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and the Sabra Myth," *Jewish Social Studies* 14 (2007), 119–143; Hannan Hever, "Minority Discourse of a National Majority: Israeli Fiction of the Early Sixties," *Prooftext*s 10 (1990), 129–147; Adia Mendelson-Maoz, "Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness* within the Framework of Immigration Narratives in Modern Hebrew Literature," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9 (2010), 71–78.

4 Amos Oz, *Judas*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016 [2014]).

5 See also:

אורין מוריס ורות קרטון-בלום, "שיחה על התעוזה העצומה של עמוס עוז", *הארץ*, 14.1.2014; רחל אליאור, "על שלושה

וארבעה: עמוס עוז, *הבשורה על-פי-יהודה*, בתוך: ד"ר לאה מזור: על מקרא, הוראה וחינוך (mikrarevivim.blogspot.com), 13.1.10; דוד רוזנטל, "יש בו עוז: *הבשורה על-פי יהודה* קורא תיגר על הקונצנזוס." תרבות//ספרות// ביקורת ספרים, (e.walla.co.il), 27.10.2014.

6 *Judas* was not the first book to challenge the orthodox Christian view of Judas as the ultimate traitor. It was preceded, as Oz knew from his many years of research on this subject, by essays, some of which he even mentions in his novel. Among these is the Christian "The Gospel of Judas," probably written between the third and fourth centuries CE, in which Judas is presented as the best of Jesus's disciples and the only one who truly understood him. According to this Gnostic essay, Judah betrayed his teacher and rabbi to the authorities because he was convinced that by doing so he would help him to discard his corporeality and reunite with God. Two other works from the corpus of modern literature that addressed Judas from a radical angle are the play *"ישוע מנצרת"* (Jesus of Nazareth) by Nathan Bistrisky (1921, 1930) and Yigal Mossinson's *יהודה איש-קריות או חטאיו של גריימוס הקדוש* (Judas) (Am Oved, 1964). Moreover, at the end of *Judas*, Oz added an author's note on some of the preparation he did prior to writing the book: "In writing this book I have been greatly helped by the book *Jesus in Jewish Eyes*, edited by Avigdor Shinan (Tel Aviv, 1999), and also by Solomon Zeitlin's *Who Crucified Jesus?* (New York, 1950)." (n. p.)

On this matter, see also:

אורין מוריס ורות קרטון-בלום, "שיחה על התעוזה העצומה של עמוס עוז", *הארץ* 14.1.2014; יגאל שוורץ, "דת, פוליטיקה וארוטיקה: 3 המפתחות של עמוס עוז", על *הבשורה על פי יהודה*, *הארץ*, ספרות ותרבות, 15.1.2014.

Maddalena Schiavo, "'How Jews see Jesus': Christian References in Amos Oz's novel *Judas*," *Studia Nauk Teologicznych* 11 (2016), 219–230.

7 יוסף קלוזנר, *ישו הנוצרי* (תל אביב: מסדה, 1954 [1922]).

8 Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (London: Vintage, 2005).

9 חנן חבר, "ספרות ישראלית עכשווית על ספה של בגידה", *תיאוריה וביקורת* 45 (2015), 279-290.

10 Ibid., 280.

11 Ibid. In an interview with Kobi Meidan (*Hotzeh Israel*, Kan Educational), Amos Oz mentioned that betrayal had always fascinated him. He was called a traitor as a boy in Jerusalem because he befriended a British soldier. He was, he said, a religious British soldier who knew biblical Hebrew and wanted to study contemporary Hebrew, and in return taught the young Oz English. He, and not only he, was recently called a traitor. In fact, to him the title of traitor was an honor. Many times, a so-called traitor is actually a person who is ahead of his time, an individual who manages to change, while others, who are incapable of doing so, hate him for that reason. History is full of examples, including, among others, Jeremiah, Spinoza, Lincoln, who freed the slaves, Churchill, who dismantled the great British empire, De Gaulle, who withdrew from Algeria, Herzl, when he agreed to Uganda, Ben-Gurion, who accepted the offer of the partition of Palestine, Begin, when he agreed to leave Sinai, Rabin, because of the Oslo Agreement, Sharon, and others.

12 דוד נויהאוז, "מה פשר כל הבגידות בספרו של עמוס עוז", *הארץ*, 28.11.14.

13 See, for example, Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca.: University of California, 1969), 239–254;

גרשון שקד, *אמנות הסיפור של עגנון* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1976); זיוה שמיר, "האמנם בגד הירשל באהובתו עם אשתו?" *מעריב*, ספרות, אמנות, ז' בשבט תשנ"ג, 29.1.1993, 25, 30; מלכה שקד, "האם הירשל היה משוגע", *הקמט שבעור הרקיע, קשרי קשרים ביצירת ש"י עגנון* (ירושלים: הוצאת ספרים על שם י"ל מאגנס, האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים, תשס"א, 122–158; ניצה בן דב, *אהבות לא מאושרות, תסכול ארוטי, אמנות ומוות ביצירת עגנון* (עם עובד, תל אביב, תשנ"ז), 270-293; יגאל שוורץ, *פולחן הסופר ודת המדינה* (תל אביב: דביר, 2011), 137-148.

14 עמוס עוז, *שתיקת השמיים, עגנון משתומם על אלוהים* (תל אביב: כתר, 1993), 39–72.

15 Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (London: Vintage, 2005), Chapter 6, pp. 32–37; Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine M. Leary (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

דן לאור, "במחוזות הזיכרון: ביוגרפיה, אידיאולוגיה וסיפור בכתיבתו של עמוס עוז", *ישראל* 7 (2005), 25–40; עמיה ליבליך, "'להדחיק ספה': כמה פנים בכתיבה האוטוביוגרפית של עמוס עוז", שם, 131-142.

16 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Columbia University Press, 1980).

17 Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, 510.

18 Ibid.

19 Dina Porat, in her article "'There was Fear in Jerusalem' The Holocaust and Anti-Semitism in Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness*" (*Israel*, Spring 2005), relates to another juxtaposition that Oz creates between the suicide of the mother and the events of the Holocaust. "Less than ten pages before the end of *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Amos Oz describes his father as angrily collecting all his mother's belongings from her room and drawers in every corner of the house several weeks after she commits suicide. Surprisingly and unconnectedly, supposedly as part of the description of the gathering of the objects, even the most insignificant of them, and their being thrown out of the house by his father, and of the son watching in horror at his father's actions, comes the following sentence: 'Was this the way Christian neighbors stood and stared, aghast, not knowing their own hearts because of the conflicting emotions, as their Jewish neighbors were taken away by force and crammed into cattle trucks?' (*A Tale of Love and Darkness*, 509)." Porat explains this, as the title of her article suggests, as related to the subject of Holocaust and anti-Semitism in Oz's novel. In the context of our discussion here, this passage also illustrates the phenomenon of Oz's "hyperbolic projection."

דינה פורת במאמרה "'היה בירושלים פחד': שואה ואנטישמיות בספרו של עמוס עוז סיפור על *אהבה וחושך*" (*ישראל*, אביב תשס"ה, 2005), 143-154.

20 Amos Oz, *Unto Death* (trans. Nicholas de Lange) (London: Vintage, 1971).

21 Ibid., 101.

22 Ibid., 102.

23 Avraham (Arnold) Band reads the novella as part of the tradition of writing on the crusades in Modern Hebrew literature. See:

אברהם בנד, *שאלות נכבדות* (אור יהודה ובאר שבע: דביר, הקשרים, אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון, 2007), 101–114.

24 Oz, *Unto Death*, 4.

25 Ibid., 5

26 Unusual in this regard is the article by Haya Shaham, who examined the two novellas as novellas, that is, through the aspect of genre, pointing to some important similarities between them. See:

אהרן קומם ויצחק בן-מרדכי (עורכים), *ספר עמוס עוז* (באר שבע: הוצאת הספרים של אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון, 2000) 51-62.

גרשון שקד, *הסיפורת העברית 1880-1980, [ה] בהרבה אשנבים בכניסות צדדיות* (תל אביב: הוצאת הקיבוץ המאוחד, כתר, 1998), 205-229.

28 Ibid., 224–225.

29 אברהם בנד, "המספר הבלתי נאמן *במיכאל שלי* וב"בדמי ימיה", *שאלות נכבדות* (עורך אברהים בנד, תל אביב ובאר שבע: דביר והקשרים, אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון, 2007), 229-238.

30 Oz, *Unto Death*, 110.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 106 (emphasis mine). Also, “I declare, comrades. I declare with all the agony and fury in my heart, that there are traitors in our midst. Red agents scurrying everywhere. They have been carefully planted here.” Ibid., 114–115.

34 Ibid., 147–148, emphasis mine.

35 Ibid., 193

36 Ibid., 194.

37 Ibid.,195–196.

איריס מילנר, "סיפור משפחתי: מיתוס המשפחה ב*סיפור על אהבה וחושך* וביצירתו המוקדמת של עמוס עוז", *ישראל* 7 (2008), 73-105.

נורית גרץ, *עמוס עוז, מונוגרפיה* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1980).

40 Ibid., 147–148.

41 Oz, *Unto Death*, 7.

42 Ibid., 17

43 Ibid., 7

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 7–8

46 Ibid., 8.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 17.

49 Ibid., 24.

50 Ibid., 32–33, emphasis mine.

52 Oz, *Unto Death*, 54.

נורית גרץ, *עמוס עוז, מונוגרפיה* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1980).

53 Ibid., 55.

54 Ibid., 59.

55 Ibid.,78.

56 Ibid., 89.

57 Ibid., 90.

58 Ibid., 92.

59 צרויה שלו, "חנה שלי", אחרית דבר, *מיכאל שלי*, מהדורה מיוחדת במלאת ארבעים שנה להוצאת הספר (תל אביב: כתר, 2008 [1968]), 293-300.

60 See also:

מיכל פלד גינצבורג, "מאדאם בובארי בירושלים", *זהויות* 3, תשע"ג – 2013, 33-44.

61 שלו, שם, 295.

62 On the connection between *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and *Judas*, see:

ניצה בן-דב, *והיא תהילתך: עיונים ביצירות ש"י עגנון, א"ב יהושע ועמוס עוז* (תל אביב: שוקן, 2006), 295.

63 Amos Oz, *My Michael*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (London: Vintage, 2011 [1972]), 133.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 See also:

זיוה שמיר, "סיפורי הילדות של עמוס עוז", *ספר עמוס עוז* (עורכים אהרן קומם ויצחק בן-מרדכי, באר שבע הוצאת הספרים של אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון,2000), 63-70.

Shamir argues that "most of the personal fiction in Hebrew, especially childhood stories that are told in the first person and are to some extent anchored in the autobiographical experience, portrays a lonely and reclusive protagonist, a protagonist who has no siblings, not one brother or one sister" (Ibid., 63). "Amos Oz's childhood stories are the best of these: childhood stories of a lonely, reclusive child, motherless and with no siblings, who lives on the outskirts of a fortified and besieged city divided by a wall and surrounded by mountains" (Ibid., 65).

67 On Oz and his narrators as "double agents," "foreign agents," "other men," and "spies," or Zecharia-Siegfried Berger, the shadow protagonist of the novel *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, presents himself (only in the Hebrew version of the book), "a spy dispatched on behalf of an enemy power."

עמוס עוז, *מקום אחר* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1966, 271)

See also:

עמוס עוז, "המעשים והספרים", *באור התכלת העזה* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1979), 13-15; אברהם בלבן, *בין אל לחיה, עיון ביצירות של עמוס עוז* (תל אביב: עם עובד, 1986), 12-15 ; נורית גרץ, *עמוס עוז, מונוגרפיה* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1980), 76-84; איילת נגב, "אני כמו מרגל או סוכן חרש" (ראיון עם עמוס עוז), *שיחות אינטימיות*, ידיעות אחרונות, ספרי חמד, 1995, 205-212.

68 יגאל שוורץ,"המגדלור: עם מותו של עמוס עוז", *הארץ*, תרבות וספרות, 31.12.2018.