

Introduction

Amos Oz's Arduous Truths and Ambivalences

RANEN OMER-SHERMAN

The armchair in the corner is ringed with light. No one is sitting in it. Do not fill it with men and women who belong elsewhere. You must listen to the rain scratching at the windowpanes. You must look only at the people who are here, inside the warm room. You must see clearly. Remove every impediment. Absorb the different voices of the large family. Summon your strength. Perhaps close your eyes. And try to give this the name of love.

—Amos Oz¹

Long after his death, the seismic sense of loss left by the departure of the preeminent novelist of Israel's post-statehood generation, the public intellectual and humanitarian, remains staggering, to such an extent that the task of a proper assessment of his achievement can still feel elusive. Where to begin amidst all his myriad qualities? There is the obstinate teller of difficult political truths, the radical empathy, lyrical melancholy, the dedicated witness of kibbutz life's moral triumphs and decay; portraits of the fervor of religious ultranationalists in the West Bank, the madness and quotidian life of Jerusalem, the untamed desert expanses; all the multifarious qualities enumerated by breathless obituarists. How best to sum up the magnitude and sheer complexity of all that? Soon after

Amos Oz's death from cancer, President Reuven Rivlin eulogized him as "the Dostoevsky of the Jewish people," and given that a new book by Oz would often exceed sales of ten thousand copies a day, many of his fellow Israeli citizens certainly seemed to concur with Rivlin.² They knew he well understood their fears, dreams, desires, and hopes.

Years earlier David Grossman might have come closest in simply describing his friend as "the offspring of all the contradictory urges and pains within the Israeli psyche."³ Grossman's succinct allusion to those seething oppositional forces well captures the vital creative catalyst that formed both Oz's moral and aesthetic imagination, the very wellspring of his art. Hence, it seemed especially apt that for the first chapter in this volume, to head the short reminiscences presented in the "In a Retrospective Mode" section, we selected Grossman's eloquent reflections (appearing in English for the first time in Jessica Cohen's luminous translation) on one of Oz's most important works of political writing, which, like the best of his literary art, was alternatively compassionate and scathing. For Grossman, *In the Land of Israel* was an especially acute critical intervention, a kind of moral barometer measuring the acute ailments Oz felt must be urgently addressed to ensure the ultimate health and durability of his society. And in that spirit, the contributors to this volume sought to capture the significant ways that Oz's greatness as a writer resides in the way those ailments (especially concerning the nature of fanaticism and betrayal), which he very often had the integrity to recognize in his own being, are ultimately shared by members of Oz's global audience and their own societies.

Perhaps it was inevitable that contradictory impulses resided at the heart of one who was very much the child of European Jewry yet raised in a society inculcated with the lofty ideal of "the new Jew." In a classic study that influenced later generations of Oz readers, Avraham Balaban examines the creative role of those fecund oppositions and fault lines:

Oz's protagonists have torn personalities. The tensions between the different psychic forces as well as between the flat, secured, and lifeless existence within societal borders and the intensive, vital, alluring experiences beyond those borders, find expression in the protagonists' struggles between light and darkness, God and Satan, spirit and body, man and woman, Jews and Arabs, culture and nature. Like a wound that cannot be healed, this tension underlies Oz's works, dictating their direction. His

works attempt to find a cure to this problem by bringing the warring contraries together to live in peace. (180)⁴

In pursuit of that elusive redemption to which Balaban here alludes, in capturing the variety of religious and political messianisms that saturated his society, Oz bequeathed us with the gift of achingly beautiful prose poems that are at the heart of so much of the best of the fiction, penetrating metaphors and similes, and above all else, tender, joyful, and melancholy portraits of the human condition.⁵ He was a writer of towering versatility. And paradoxes. For if he was often too easily construed as a paragon of Sabra identity, he was always the consummate insider-outsider, someone whose youthful longing to conform to labor Zionist culture only underscored his own insecurities in ways that would enable the adult writer to achieve a profoundly empathic attunement to the struggles of others. Hence, as I frequently reread the short fiction, novels, and essays alongside my students, many of them immigrants, I'm often struck by what they most appreciated about Oz's language, how seemingly beset by the painful historical fissures of a very different society, he somehow seemed to speak to the problems of their own, or to the places they had left behind. Often, Oz's clarity helped to reinforce their own.

Even before the Trump years, many of those students (again, immigrants or the children of immigrants) had been wounded by the dehumanizing forms of xenophobia, intolerance, and anti-immigrant sentiment creeping into the American language. They appreciated Oz's humanity, above all his guiding ethos that insisted on precision in language as a higher ethical value.⁶ In a benighted era in which we have seen the frequent devaluation and utter disregard of truth itself, he can seem positively quixotic—and yet absolutely essential. Condemning those who referred to human beings anywhere as “aliens, burdens, or parasites,” Oz famously declared in one of the passages that stirred them with its resonating immediacy: “Precision is a value. . . . The moment we are precise with our nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs, we are closer to doing justice, in a small way. Not universal justice. Not international justice. But the way I describe a person, a mode of behavior or even an inanimate object, the closer I am to the essence, the more I evade either exaggeration or incitement. Words are important because they are one of the main means by which humans do things to each other. Saying is doing.”⁷ Even in more experimental postmodern works, such as *The Same Sea* [*Oto Ha-Yam*, 1999] or *Rhyming Life and Death* [*Charuzei Ha-Chayim*

Ve-Ha-Mavet, 2007], his voice remains steadfast in imaginatively grappling with the critical problem of the various distortions of identities, nationalism, and language obstructing the path to human redemption. To an unprecedented degree, Oz contributed to the (perhaps unfair) expectations held by readers around the world; that by its very definition Israeli literature must be exceptionally self-critical, that its writers dare not look away from the injustices of their state.⁸

To succeed even partially, a volume of this nature necessarily demands a genuinely multifaceted vision encompassing a range of methodologies and traditions that grapple with both the literary and polemical dimensions of Oz's legacy. To that end I am exceedingly grateful for the eager participation of some of our most accomplished veteran scholars as well as exciting younger voices whose work embraces a wide range of cross-disciplinary concerns, raising important new questions. Though I have enjoyed the considerable privilege of editing two previously well-read essay collections (*The Jewish Graphic Novel; Narratives of Dissent: War in Contemporary Israeli Arts and Culture*), I was intimidated by the responsibility to assemble a volume that might do even modest justice to Oz's extraordinary oeuvre. My goal was always to bring lasting critical pleasure to those who have read him over decades, while also stimulating the thinking of future generations of students and others only lately discovering him. While on this journey, I became reconciled to the fact that while an edited collection of this limited scope cannot possibly encompass every facet of such a remarkable career, there is nevertheless an extraordinary range of disciplinary perspectives on display in these chapters. Naturally, major themes and loci addressed include the kibbutz, the city of Jerusalem, the idea of a Jewish homeland, and his own life story. While some contributors examine Oz's most famous concerns, such as the scourge of fanaticism, others address unusual, critically overlooked but highly consequential dimensions of his legacy and include the ruminations of an acclaimed young novelist whose voice is provoked by Oz's progressive politics and humanism as well as its shortcomings. Others, who knew Oz in life, append piquant recollections to their critical discussions. Perhaps what most lends coherence to these essays is that all the contributors are keenly attentive to the intricate ways that the inner lives of Oz's characters are often at odds with or otherwise shaped by Israel's rural and urban environments.

If for some, Oz was famously preoccupied by the frail social fabric and complex realities of the kibbutz (in ways that bookend his entire career), it remains equally true that up to the very end of his life, Jerusalem

compelled his attention again and again. In his fiction, Jerusalem is the fraught arena in which, from antiquity to the present moment, both spiritual inspiration and the corrosive force of fanaticism perpetually seem to incubate. Has any writer ever captured the literal as well as figurative light and shadows of Jerusalem of the last years of the British Mandate to such brilliant effect?⁹ Few prose writers have equaled his achingly beautiful and lingering descriptions of its famous light, alleys, stony houses of worship, and pervasive melancholy.¹⁰ Accordingly, this volume's explorations are bookended by thoughtful reappraisals of *My Michael*, Oz's second and in some ways still most controversial novel (critic Gal Beckerman memorably describes it as "a sort of *Madame Bovary* set against the backdrop of white Jerusalem stone").¹¹ These include the personal reflections of two extraordinarily accomplished scholars whose self-understandings were profoundly transformed by reading the novel back in the heady decade of the 1960s, one recalling his first encounter with the book as a soldier in the aftermath of the 1967 War (in which Oz had also fought), and the other reflecting on the resonances Oz's portrayal of dysfunctional domesticity had for her as a young immigrant woman learning to cope with her bewildering new environment.¹² Other contributors address Oz's important autobiographical works. Widely considered the greatest autobiographical work in modern Hebrew literature and Oz's most acclaimed achievement, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* [*Sipur Al Ahava Ve-Choshech*, 2002] is the subject of two incisive discussions by scholars whose voices have long inspired others exploring the intersections of Israeli literature, gender studies, and ethnography.

No hagiography is intended in this volume (even if there remains more admiration than disdain) and some discussants pay heed to the fact that even as Oz vigorously fought for his vision of Israel's future, both the Ashkenazi left with which he was most identified faded in his lifetime and his own voice became less relevant as those of the country's Mizrahi, Russian Jews, and right-wing Orthodox grew in influence. Whether painful for us to acknowledge or not, Oz's long insistence on the two-state solution and ending the occupation of the West Bank has come to seem utterly anachronistic in the current reality in which even Arab states seem willing to turn their backs on the plight of Palestinians. Yet even as his position was increasingly marginalized at home in later years, Oz's literary and cultural reputation continued to swell internationally. As so much of his vast international audience came to anticipate, Oz's lucid interpretations of the socio-political turmoil roiling his society was always accompanied

by intensely lyrical language, deep penetrations into the vulnerabilities of the human psyche, and the consolations of transcendent hope.



Almost immediately, Oz's voice captivated European and American readers and critics, replicating his early success with his Hebrew audience. Laudatory reviews followed the translations of his early books, each of which (whether satirically or melodramatically) sharply interrogated the capacity of ideology to serve human beings in all their full complexity. In one salient example, not long after the Yom Kippur War (in which Oz had fought in a tank crew on the Golan Heights), the *New York Times* senior book critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt hailed the startling ironies of *Elsewhere, Perhaps* [*Makom Acher, Sifriat Hapoalim*, 1966], proclaiming it a "charmingly unpious tapestry of Israeli life," praising the self-critical portrayals of the fictional kibbutz of its young kibbutz author:

[T]he men and women of Kibbutz Metsudat Ram try to march in lockstep toward a new socialist utopia, but snapping at their ankles and tripping them into disarray are the traditions of their disparate pasts. Russian Jews are at odds with German Jews: the talkers are in conflict with the doers; the young don't see eye to eye with the old. Is kibbutz life the paradigm of cooperative living? The women gossip and kvetch over trivia, the men stop speaking to each other over nothing. And the greatest irony of all: Just as Kibbutz Metsudat Ram is preparing a heroic military sortie to establish its right to cultivate besieged borderland, the fabric of its social life is rent by a sexual scandal straight out of a French farce.¹³

The sheer audacity that Lehmann-Haupt and other early critics found so remarkable, the unstinting capacity to mock the very tropes and conventions others deemed sacred, his sophisticated understanding of the deep and perhaps fatal conflicts within the Zionist enterprise, would continue to distinguish Oz's literary imagination throughout his career.¹⁴ Yet even his most unsparing interrogations of his society's dreams and myths were never completely devoid of affection.

One of the prevalent conventions adapted by his critics concerned the role of politics, perhaps best exemplified by Joseph Cohen who insisted

that “Oz does not use his fiction directly to accommodate his political beliefs . . . rejecting an ulterior sociopolitical motive.”¹⁵ Yet over time, this claim has perhaps been somewhat overstated. To be fair, Oz himself encouraged the rise of the myth, telling numerous interviewers abroad that “I have two pens on my desk. One black and one blue. One I use to tell stories and the other to tell the government to go to hell—and I never mix them.”¹⁶ Yet while if it is not entirely inaccurate to say that there are few if any instances of raw polemic in the fiction, there is a more complex truth worth considering. Because, to put it simply, to deny the presence of an unwavering political consciousness in the fiction would require willfully looking away from the tenacious presence of Palestinian ruins (let alone the living bedouin of “Nomad and Viper”) that Oz resolutely sets before us again and again. His own eyes were trained upon those remnants of indigeneity, and other inconvenient vestiges of historical truth. Memorializations of the Palestinian past haunt his most resonant novels from *A Perfect Peace* to *Judas*, where the remains of the villages of Sheikh Badr and Deir Yassin stubbornly cling to the transformed landscape in mute accusation. Indeed, persistent reminders of the Naqba and Arab indigeneity constitute some of the most haunting and abiding resonances in all of the work.¹⁷ However, it should be stressed that if in early works such as “Nomad and Viper” it is impossible to ignore the searing indictments of the original Hebrew prose, it is also true that the confusion about the putative demarcation between politics and fiction may owe in part to the overly subtle if not altogether censorious impulses of foreign publishers and translators.

In his brilliant discussion of the Oz that readers encountered in English editions, Omri Asscher documents numerous instances in which some of the most irrational hatred and savagery of certain Jewish protagonists is tempered, obscured, or even erased in the translations. In other cases, crucial allusions to Palestinian history or the destructive nature of the 1948 War vanish. For instance, in *A Perfect Peace* (one of his most widely read novels of the 1980s), numerous disquieting references to the Palestinian village Sheikh Dahr are entirely omitted in the English version.¹⁸ If I dwell on these matters it is because it seems vital in the reality of today’s Israel to stress that, while never descending to raw polemic, Oz’s art is never entirely separable from his political consciousness—and any gap between these realms narrows considerably in his final novel.

Looking back at the entire oeuvre in the wake of his passing we find an unyielding engagement with the problem of fanaticism and the

fascistic personality, a theme that sadly shows little sign of becoming obsolete. Indeed, that common denominator prevails beginning in his earliest works, stories such as “Before His Time” and “Nomad and Viper,” or the complementary novellas in *Unto Death* [*Ad Mavet*, 1971] that provocatively mirror Crusader butchery and 20th-century Zionist fantasies of vengeance, through the magisterial memoir *A Tale of Love and Darkness* [*Sipur Al Ahava Ve-Choshech*, 2002] to the late essays of *Dear Zealots* [*Shalom La-Kana'im: Shalosh Machshavot*, 2017]. As for the political writing itself (revered by some and abhorred by others), Oz unabashedly claimed for both himself and the secular left a direct lineage to the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic mode.¹⁹

Judaism’s greatest legacy for the modern world, as far as Oz was concerned, resided in the wisdom of its ancient prophets rather than the capricious governance of its kings. That understanding often led to some of his most incisive (and wittiest) observations, as in a memorable passage that rather elegantly exposes the hypocrisy and blinkered historical understanding of Israel’s Haredim (translated here as Halakhic Judaism):

Halakhic Judaism . . . practices Jewish heritage as a museum piece. Beyond all the fierce and petty controversies among themselves, they are all utterly convinced that they are closer to the “source” than secular Jews. Some remind us, for example, that sounding the air-raid siren on Memorial Day is a non-Jewish custom, as are the National flag and anthem. They are of course, absolutely right—right to a flaw. They are right as they wear the costumes of Polish noblemen of past centuries, right as they sing charming Ukrainian melodies, right as they piously dance Slavic folk dances. They are also right as they argue with us, using the principles of Aristotelian logic—courtesy of Maimonides, and right as they go forth to conquer the land, on the basis of Hegelian historiography—courtesy of Rabbi Kook. There is no reason to condemn halakhic Judaism for all it has taken from the Persians, the Greeks, the Arabs, the Poles and the Russians. We may raise an eyebrow, however, at the claims of *Shulhan Arukh* Judaism regarding its proximity to “the source,” while accusing its opponents of “Hellenizing” and adopting “foreign customs.” (“A Full Cart” 26)

As apparent in this memorable exemplar, if there was dogged constancy in Oz’s embrace of secular Jewish culture and the scathing criticism he

almost gleefully unleashed on religious fundamentalists, that inclination was staunchly erudite, deeply informed by the Hebrew Bible and Talmud, evident from the earliest fiction to late nonfiction works such as *Jews and Words* (coauthored work with daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger), and *Dear Zealots*. When considering the cumulative impact of the reflections in *Dear Zealots*, rather than demarcating a late phase in Oz's thought, this work should be recognized as merely one particularly eloquent riff upon a theme that had long reverberated throughout his polemics and art alike.

Oz never lost an opportunity to wield the arts of creative empathy against the insularity, tribalism, and uncritical conformity of fanatics in his fiction and was equally consistent in his polemics such as "How to Cure a Fanatic" where he identifies the greatest crisis besetting both the Middle East and the entire world as that of "the ancient struggle between fanaticism and pragmatism."²⁰ Building on this theme in his acceptance speech for the 2007 Asturias Prize he proclaimed that: "I believe in literature as a bridge between peoples. I believe curiosity can be a moral quality. I believe imagining the other can be an antidote to fanaticism."²¹ Oz was of course too sophisticated and rigorously unsentimental a thinker to pretend that the mere act of reading literature was "redemptive" (readily acknowledging that global literary history was filled with examples of poetry and fiction used to stoke the hatreds of tribal or nationalistic fervor). Nevertheless, he tirelessly insisted that the works of the greatest writers immerse readers in the kinds of rich ambivalences and complexities that might just wean them from the seductions of doctrinal absolutes and reductive thinking.

Gogol, Kafka, Faulkner, and Amichai were favorites in that regard, and Shakespeare perhaps his preeminent exemplar: "Every extremism, every uncompromising crusade, every form of fanaticism in Shakespeare ends up either in a tragedy or in a comedy. The fanatic is never happier or more satisfied in the end; either he is dead or he becomes a joke. This is a good inoculation" ("How to Cure" 63). As one who famously insisted on precision in language, Oz took pains to stress that it was critical to avoid diluting the term's potency by applying it to anyone who was merely passionate about their convictions: "I'm certainly not suggesting that anyone who has a strong opinion is a fanatic. I'm saying that the seed of fanaticism always lies in uncompromising self-righteousness, the plague of many centuries" ("How to Cure" 51). Other ruinous attributes Oz ascribes to fanatics include an appetite for sentimental kitsch, attraction to cults of personality, and a morbid obsession with their own death.²²

Conceding that extremists might occasionally wield a shrill sarcasm, Oz regarded them as essentially humorless. And humor was perhaps his

essential deterrent for any such tendencies, whether in himself or others: “I have never once in my life seen a fanatic, nor have I ever seen a person with a sense of humor become a fanatic. . . . Humor contains the ability to laugh at ourselves, humor is relativism, humor is the ability to see yourself as others may see you, humor is the capacity to realize that no matter how righteous you are and how terribly wronged you have been, there is a certain side to life that is always a bit funny” (“How to Cure” 65).²³ Toward the end of his life, Oz revisited and refined his framing of the problem, declaring to British journalist Jonathan Freedland that “A fanatic wants to change other people for their own good. He’s a great altruist, more interested in you than in himself. He wants to save your soul, change you, redeem you—and if you prove to be irredeemable, he will be at your throat and kill you. For your own good.”²⁴ As alluded to above, the genesis of that agonistic relation with fanaticism is present in the earliest works, thematically anchoring the entirety of his 1965 debut *Artsot ha-tan* [*Where the Jackals Howl*], the seminal collection of his first stories penned at Kibbutz Hulda, which he joined in 1957 (and where his royalties went to the collective’s budget). In perhaps its most representative story “Nomad and Viper” [“Navadim va-tsefa”], the malignant tensions and misunderstandings between kibbutzniks and the desperate, famine-stricken Bedouins in the desert beyond builds into a brilliant deconstruction of the “savage” and the “civilized” hierarchical binary that devastatingly overturned the self-righteous illusions of the Labor Zionist imagination in that era.²⁵

In spite of its canonical status, it is perhaps too easy to forget that the story was an extraordinarily audacious cultural and literary salvo against the established cultural pieties of its time (aside from its unflinching cultural message, the story’s sly recasting of Bereshit 34 warrants appreciation as a powerful contemporary midrash alongside later works such as Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent*). The grim episode of Dinah and the Shechemites, with its avowed rape and violent retribution, clearly struck the young writer with a sense of tragic timeliness, ironically foregrounding contemporary developments. By the time of the story’s composition, the semi-arid northern Negev region had become a tense arena for frequent conflicts between Bedouin herders and Jewish farmers, largely due to a severe drought. That dire environmental circumstance (a phenomenon lately viewed by Israeli scientists as an early sign of global climate change) meant that while new kibbutzim expanded Israeli agriculture into traditional nomadic grazing areas, the herds of Bedouins inevitably grazed on

the settlers' crops, greatly amplifying tensions and open conflict between groups that might have otherwise coexisted.

In capturing this deteriorating reality, "Nomad and Viper" sets forth numerous exemplars of both "othering" language to suggest the ways that the "enlightened" kibbutzniks might rationalize their very most violent instincts and actions.²⁶ As haunting as any of the earliest works, this story memorably brings Oz's powerful lyricism front and center to unforgettable effect, a singular stylistic mode that Robert Alter characterizes as "substituting for conventional narration a prose-poem method of exposition through imagistic motifs, and reiterated verbal formulas, an incantatory language used to evoke a mood, to intimate a subject beyond the grasp of words."²⁷ Four decades later, Alter's penetrating observation still encapsulates the very essence of what would distinguish Oz's writerly technique to the very end.



Over the years, some on the right found it convenient to dismiss Oz as just another variant of the domestic Israel-basher, too dovish or hypocritical to turn his famous critical gaze upon extremists on the left. Yet as the late essays of *Dear Zealots* remind us, Oz readily found fault with both extremes. In one revealing example ("Dreams Israel Should Let Go of Soon") he argues forcefully against "the dual brainwashing" of both the non-Zionist far left and right for insisting on "the irreversibility" of *ha-Matsav* (the occupation), condemning their efforts "to break the spirit of the Zionist left."²⁸ Whereas "post-Zionists" and "anti-Zionists" insist that the only way forward is "giving up the Zionist dream and accepting our fate as a minority under Arab rule," the Zionist left vehemently "opposes the occupation and refuses to rule over another nation" while refusing to repudiate the Jewish "natural, historical, legal right to a sovereign existence" in a democratic state that Oz would clearly prefer to be much smaller. But for Oz, embattled Zionist liberals were haplessly caught between a rock and a hard place: "despised by the hilltop settlers on the one hand, and by the post-Zionist and anti-Zionist front on the other. They have both been denouncing the left for years and are eager to trounce it . . . these two extremes have conspired to make us despair and force us to choose between giving up on Zionism and giving up on democracy" (*Dear Zealots* 132).²⁹ Notwithstanding those altogether sincere instances of evenhandedness, in an Israel that was rapidly becoming unrecognizable to him Oz

undeniably reserved his greatest umbrage for the “supposed authenticity” of the religious fundamentalists’ worldview, a hierarchy that relegates secular humanists to the despised lowest tier of Israeli society.

That abiding concern was most passionately expressed a year after Rabin’s assassination by a Bar-Ilan University law student. As part of its institutional soul-searching, Oz was invited to deliver an address before a large audience to commemorate the university’s newly established Chair for Democracy and Tolerance. That famous lecture (widely circulated in Hebrew and English), “A Full Cart or an Empty One?,” ranges across time from biblical prophecy to utopian-socialist thinkers such as Berl Katznelson and A. D. Gordon to argue vehemently against those (including some among Bar-Ilan’s faculty), who would condemn democracy as a foreign body rather than the quintessential expression of Jewish culture.³⁰

In this address, Oz castigates the religious-fundamentalist illusions of the Greater Israel movement: “based upon the premise that some of the land’s inhabitants are less important than we are: we have our Torah, nationalism, aspirations, rights, and the Messiah. The Arab has a belly and a pair of hands and can therefore be trained to be a grateful ‘hewer of wood’ and a contented ‘drawer of water.’ This twisted approach has also come to color religious-secular relations: there are people who are fully human, who have the Torah and its precepts, and the things that they hold dear and sacred are truly dear and sacred; and there are people who are not quite as human—the secular, who don’t seem to hold anything dear and to whom nothing is sacred. The latter are therefore, like an ‘empty cart,’ that can be moved aside to make way for those who possess a ‘full cart’” (27).³¹ In related instances scattered throughout an essay written in the same spirit, “Many Lights, Not One Light,” he pointedly cites passages from Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and Psalms, to indict the spirit of fanatic intolerance to ironic effect: “At the very bottom are the worst of the worst, the most un-Jewish, the most Israel-hating, the most goyish: the lefties, who insist on pursuing peace and protecting human rights, who won’t let anyone quietly commit a minor injustice or a little nationalist usurpation, and who won’t stop droning on about ‘Justice, justice shalt thou pursue,’ ‘Ye shall have one manner of law, as well for the stranger as for the home-born,’ ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ and ‘Seek peace and pursue it.’ If you so much as . . . deliver a collective punishment to a whole Arab village, those lefties start badgering us with foreign notions like ‘Every man shall be put to death for his own sin.’ Where on earth did these goyim come up with all those bleeding-heart concepts?” (*Dear Zealots* 102, 103).

For those who perceived Oz as aloof or even supercilious in public appearances, it was perhaps too easy to forget what he kept well-hidden for many years, that the origins of much he had to say in both his fiction and polemics actually had its origins in the acute vulnerability, humiliations, and outsider status inflicted on him in his youth at Hulda and perhaps earlier.³² If we manage to keep the image of that lonely youth before us, it is perhaps easier to grasp the emotional history which spurred the creation of tormented characters such as Azariah in *A Perfect Peace*, Moshe Yashar and other lonely souls in *Between Friends*, Shmuel Ash in *Judas* (perhaps traces are even visible in Hannah Gonen of *My Michael*). Though direct connections between Oz's life and fiction were often oblique, they were not entirely absent especially if one considers the poignant resemblance between Oz and his character Proffy, young narrator of his enthralling young-adult novel *Panther in the Basement* [*Panther Ba-Martef*, Keter, 1995].

As those familiar with Oz's biography will recall, when Oz was merely eight, he too befriended a biblical Hebrew speaking British Mandate policeman who had even memorized much of the Hebrew Bible: "When the other children discovered my friendship with this man, they called me a traitor" (*Dear Zealots* 9). This rueful memory of his earliest brush with infamy seems the genesis of Oz's subsequent agonistic relation with the accusatory label of "traitor": "Much later, I learned to take comfort in the thought that, for fanatics, a traitor is anyone who dares to change. Fanatics of all kinds, in all places at all times, loathe and fear change, suspecting that it is nothing less than a betrayal resulting from dark, base motives" (9).³³ Clearly the memory of those ostracisms and rejections took deep root in his moral imagination.³⁴ Given his utter estrangement from Yehuda Klausner after his mother Fania's suicide, his subsequent radical self-making, it doesn't seem a stretch to conclude of Oz's life that, in an almost Wordsworthian sense, the child is very much "father of the man."³⁵ And it should be stressed that if the unhealed wounds of those unhappy days are visible in critical aspects of his portrayals of young men and boys, it is no less evident in his portrayal of the feminine, for better and for some, decidedly worse.³⁶ For Nurith Gertz, Oz harbored deep reservoirs of pain never fully expressed (not even in the raw intimacy of *A Tale of Love and Darkness*), and she sees him as perpetually resurrecting his lost mother throughout his fiction: "In all his books, there's a woman like that, a mother who comes back to life, dies metaphorically, is reborn in the next book, and again and again. All his life he's resurrecting that mother. All his life he goes to that locked gate, hitting it again and again. Initially,

in his first, violent books, he hits it in anger, then gradually in a different way. Underlying everything, I think, is that mother and the desire to shake her. Gradually, with the years, he got to some sort of Ithaca. To home, to places where he can forgive her.”³⁷

In his final years, an unexpected development would form another crucial bridge to the grim travails of Oz’s early life. Contra the euphoria overwhelming most Israelis (and Jews around the world) after the six days of fighting that culminated in Israel’s triumphal control of all of Jerusalem, Sinai, the West Bank, and Gaza, Oz knew that he and his fellow soldiers had witnessed or participated in horrific events. Traveling with a reel-to-reel tape recorder to kibbutzim across the country, he and other participants asked their fellow veterans to share their traumatic accounts of the war and some of their grim accounts were published a mere three months later in Hebrew by the kibbutz movement, *Siach Lochamim* (translated several years later into English as *The Seventh Day* [1971]).³⁸ Though an international sensation at the time, this book was largely forgotten in Israeli society in ensuing decades as a quaint relic of its time.³⁹ Until by chance documentary film director Mor Loushy discovered the original audio transcripts. So unsettled was she by the kibbutz reservists’ grim stories about atrocities and their prescient intimations about the corruption of occupation—muted in the original publication—that Loushy immediately recognized they deserved public attention. The result was the disquieting documentary *Censored Voices*, arguably Israel’s most urgent film about the horrors of war, individual conscience, and occupation.⁴⁰

As the camera focuses on Oz and others (now fifty years older) listening for the first time to the anguished, often shocking confessions of their younger selves, their raw responses are haunting. Several make critical connections between Israel in the present moment and the past, none more memorably than a moment when Oz himself contrasts contemporary Israel with the candor and soul-searching of his generation:

I see more apathy in today’s society, more lack of sensitivity. What happens in the territories sometimes crosses a red line, constituting a war crime, but is [viewed as happening] there and not here. There is some mechanism of repression and disengagement at play. Many people don’t read news items relating to the occupation when they come across them. Thus, the media doesn’t adequately cover what happens there. Every day, every hour, Palestinians suffer humiliation, harassment

at checkpoints, in their villages—the settlers’ sewage flows downhill into Arab villages. Already during the fighting in Sinai, I felt that this victory was sowing seeds of deep hatred toward Israel. . . . I knew we were at the beginning of a long and difficult road of a bloody war with the entire Arab and Muslim world. I knew that peace could not come from the defeat and humiliation of the Arabs.⁴¹

At the beginning of his statement, Oz suggests that he sees no counterpart among the soldiers serving in the checkpoints of the West Bank for what he and others had dared condemn in their own generation.⁴² Yet of course the very point of Loushy’s film is that the critical testimonies of Oz and his fellow reservists (including comparisons to the Holocaust) not only transgressed what their society was apparently willing to hear, but that its messengers would be deemed suspect. Perhaps the most immediate corollary to Oz’s sympathy for those deemed “traitors” (those whose bold thinking might offer potential solutions for the toughest quandaries and conflicts of their society) is what Jonathan Freedland rightly hails as Oz’s “defining creed,” an unwavering “belief in compromise . . . because he understood that one’s enemy is also, and always, a human being.”⁴³

In the titular essay of *How to Cure a Fanatic*, Oz revisits his earliest encounters with the strains of intolerance against which he would later rebel:

My . . . childhood in Jerusalem rendered me an expert in comparative fanaticism. Jerusalem of my childhood, back in the 1940s, was full of self-proclaimed prophets, redeemers, and messiahs. Even today, every other Jerusalemite has his or her personal formula for instant salvation. . . . I’m quoting a famous line from an old song, “they came to Jerusalem to build it and to be built by it.” In fact, some of them—Jews, Christians and Muslims, socialists, anarchists, world reformers—actually came to Jerusalem not so much to build it, not so much to be built by it, but rather to get crucified, or to crucify others, or both. (*How to Cure* 42)

Even as Oz prided himself first and foremost as a “listener” in a society of self-righteous individuals (in which “no one ever listens”) he readily confesses here that “as a child . . . I was myself a brainwashed little fanatic all the way. Self-righteous, chauvinistic, deaf and blind to any view that

differed from the powerful Jewish, Zionist narrative of the time. I was a stone-throwing kid, a Jewish Intifada kid” (*How to Cure* 43). And in describing the development of *Panther*’s precocious Proffy, Oz remarks that the child’s triumph and true coming-of-age epiphany occurs when he learns to embrace “a sense of ambivalence, a capacity for abandoning his black-and-white-views” (*How to Cure* 45). It is clear that whenever Oz later spoke of this child protagonist it was invariably in a self-referential mode. For in this bildungsroman’s denouement, Proffy suffers a falling out of childhood for “[m]uch of the joy and fascination and zeal and simpleness of life has gone away” and he is scorned by his oldest friends, labeled “traitor” (*How to Cure* 45).

For those who may have overlooked this stirring young-adult novel, it bears heeding that Oz identifies an extended passage covering the story’s first page and a half (beginning: “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” [*Panther* 1]) as his most essential statement on the scourge of fanaticism. After suffering painful rejection by his friends and left estranged and isolated at the end of the novel, Proffy comes to learn what its author knew: “Only he who loves might become a traitor. Treason is not the opposite of love; it is one of its many options. Traitor, I think, is the one who changes in the eyes of those who cannot change and would not change and hate change and cannot conceive of change, except that they always want to change you . . . to be a fanatic means to be, to some extent and in some way, a traitor in the eyes of the fanatic” (*How to Cure* 48–49). Up to the very end of his life, Oz would happily implicate himself as a “recovered fanatic,” and the bittersweet essence of that hard-won ethos is encoded in many of his finest works, absolutely permeating *Judas*, his much-anticipated final novel.

In many respects his most startling and ultimately rewarding novel, *Judas* warrants some attention here especially for those unfamiliar with it. In the aftermath of his passing, it is manifestly clear that it constitutes Oz’s most eloquent and fully realized response to a lifetime of being vilified as a “traitor” by some of his countrymen (from his early involvement in Peace Now to his late comparison of violent West Bank settlers to neo-Nazis, which earned him death threats). This astonishing late work represents the intellectual culmination and brilliant literary flowering of Oz’s deep preoccupation with the vilification of iconoclastic thinking and heretics. For if the exceedingly malleable nature of just what “treason” and “loyalty” genuinely portend enlivened his earlier works, in his jolting final work,

Oz delivered an especially multilayered and timeless statement. Placing the “virus of treachery” front and center, *Judas* offers his most thoughtful and urgent statement concerning the uneasy relationship between nationalism and critical citizenship.⁴⁴ It is a consummate portrait of the friendlessness of the prophet. And in myriad ways it slyly illuminates Oz’s own condition as one labeled a “raving radical” by his enemies on the right but who considered himself simply as “an evolutionist” or “country doctor” patiently ministering to his country’s affliction (“The Order of the Teaspoon” 93).⁴⁵

As for *Judas*’s reception, after roughly a decade devoted to essays (*How to Cure a Fanatic*, and *Jews and Words* with daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger), lean short-story collections (*Scenes from Village Life* and *Between Friends*) and a fable for children (*Suddenly in the Depths of the Forest*), Oz’s late return to the novel had stirred the interest of many. Moreover, it was ultimately deemed a masterpiece in the eyes of many readers and critics (during a visit to Louisville in the spring of 2017, David Grossman told me that he considered it a magnificent return to form after less ambitious efforts). Yet if to so many, *Judas* seemed one of Oz’s most accomplished, philosophically resonant works, an old-fashioned novel of ideas in the best, provocative sense, such acclaim may owe in part to the fact that it was a book that had been slowly simmering for most of his life. Oz first began reading the New Testament as a lonely teenager in the library at Hulda.⁴⁶ Today we know that over the decades he remained absorbed by the gospels as well as imaginative works on early Christianity’s Jewish origins such as Sholem Asch’s 1939 controversial novel *The Nazarene* (perhaps the first modern literary work to champion the “Jewish Jesus,” the bestseller’s wide condemnation by Yiddishists must have further piqued Oz’s interest). Brimming with intricate storylines and characters who are brilliantly alive and get under one’s skin, the novel is woven around a structural triptych consisting of the story’s “present” set in the harsh Jerusalem winter of 1959–1960, the chief protagonist is a young biblical scholar whose investigation of the portrayal of Judas in the early Christian imagination leads to a startling conclusion, and lastly a beguiling alternate history of Roman Palestine narrated by none other than Judas himself. Initially, its antihero Shmuel Ash seems to be one of Oz’s more familiar types, a luftmensch sharing many of the dysfunctional and antiheroic qualities of his predecessors (as early as the tragic paratrooper in his classic story “The Way of the Wind,” which was partially based on a disaster that occurred at Hulda during a parachuting exhibition on Independence Day).⁴⁷

We meet the protagonist at a moment of acute crisis: university studies abandoned, romantic life in ruins, and beleaguered by asthma, he faces a bleak financial horizon. In the era in which Zionist codes of identity were perhaps most prevalent, Shmuel has long anguished that (given as he is to sentiment and uncontrollable tears), he falls woefully short of the idealized norms of Sabra masculinity. Indeed, in many ways he seems to hearken back to the kinds of wistful, not-entirely-at-home European immigrants that people Oz's trenchant reminiscences of Jerusalem in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*.

At one point, he ruefully contemplates a colorful poster for the Jewish National Fund displaying his converse image: "a tough, muscular pioneer, his sleeves rolled up . . . top button of his shirt undone, revealing a suntanned, hairy chest" (28). Nebbish or not, the character is drawn with such fierce tenderness and a rich interiority that he may prove one of Oz's most lovable and enduring characters. When his prospects look particularly dire, Shmuel finds employment as caregiver for a cynical old man named Gershom Wald. Gershom's bookish household includes the provocative presence of Atalia, daughter of the late Shealtiel Abravanel, who spent his last days scorned by society for his dovish views on coexistence ("They said he was the bastard son of an Arab. Hebrew newspapers mockingly called him the Muezzin, or Sheikh Abravanel, or the sword of Islam"). Embittered by those who drove her compassionate father into a kind of exile, Atalia is also scarred by the particularly horrific death of her husband (Gershom's son), in the 1948 War. As lovelorn Shmuel becomes obsessed with Atalia, secrets are revealed and given the clamorous after-life of the two dead men, who seem to take up at least as much room as the living, the little apartment can seem claustrophobic. Other ghosts and hauntings persist in the novel, as a quiet but insistent backdrop to the political and ideological debates teeming in these pages the presence of the ruins of a pre-1948 Palestinian village (with its "half-built festival hall") underscores what else has been lost.

Ultimately it is Atalia who most bears the burden of these losses, and as such she serves as Oz's most morally impassioned and intellectually eloquent witness to the debacle of war and the inhumanity too often rationalized in nationalist causes. In that regard, it seems worth recalling that Oz was sometimes criticized for female characters who merely function as passive catalysts for male desire. Yet if at first Atalia seems perhaps cast in that same vein, frustratingly elusive and withholding (at least through Shmuel's gaze), she ultimately emerges as one of Oz's most perceptive and

starkly rational characters. Here the woman (whose husband's body was desecrated by the enemy), vehemently confronts the helplessly infatuated Shmuel with her disgust over the destructive forces of extremist male ambition and desire: "I can't love men. You've held the whole world in your hands for thousands of years and you've turned it into a horror show. A slaughterhouse" (*Judas* 187).⁴⁸ As the novel's living embodiment of the spirit of dissidence Oz long championed, Atalia emerges as one of the most fully realized and consequential characters of his career.

In thought-provoking interviews appearing around the time of *Judas's* publication, Oz was clearly invigorated by the questions he had raised, especially concerning the marginalization of figures like Atalia and her idealist father; losing no opportunity to stress that many of the most significant political leaders in history were called a traitor by many of their own people, most poignantly his late friend Shimon Peres (who reportedly loved arguing with the novelist) a dedicated reader of all his books (on various occasions Oz tirelessly cited Abraham Lincoln, de Gaulle, Gorbachev, Begin, Sadat, Rabin, even the prophet Jeremiah among his pantheon of "traitors"). In widely varying degrees and contexts, these and other figures Oz acknowledged exhibited a propensity for both critical introspection and the conviction that change was possible, just as he tirelessly advocates in *Dear Zealots*: "Contending with fanaticism does not mean destroying all fanatics but rather cautiously handling the little fanatic who hides, more or less, inside each of our souls. It also means ridiculing, just a little, our own convictions; being curious; and trying to take a peek, from time to time, not only through our neighbor's window but, more important, at the reality viewed from that window, which will necessarily be different from the one seen through our own" (35). In this light, the Shmuel of *Judas* seems almost transparently cast as the author's ideological proxy, especially in his belated recognition that: "Anyone willing to change will always be considered a traitor by those who cannot change and are scared to death of change and don't understand it and loathe change" (249). That role becomes even more explicit in Shmuel's speech declaiming that the designation "traitor" "ought really to be seen as a badge of honor," more brazen still when he invokes many of the very same figures his creator often extolled in his late interviews and essays:

Not long ago in France, de Gaulle was elected president by the votes of the supporters of French rule in Algeria, and now it transpires that his intention was to abandon French

rule and grant full independence to the Arab majority. Those who previously enthusiastically supported him now call him a traitor. . . . The prophet Jeremiah was considered a traitor both by the Jerusalem rabble and by the royal court. The Talmudic rabbis ostracized Elisha ben Abuya and called him *Aher*, “the Other.” . . . Lincoln, the liberator of the slaves, was called a traitor by his opponents. The German officers who tried to assassinate Hitler were executed as traitors. Every so often in history, courageous people have appeared who were ahead of their time and were called traitors . . . Herzl was called a traitor just because he dared to entertain the thought of a Jewish state outside the Land of Israel . . . Even David Ben-Gurion . . . when he agreed . . . to the partition of the land into two states one Jewish and the other Arab, was called a traitor by many Jews here. (248–49)

Defending the audacious utopianism of Atalia’s late father, Shmuel remarks that “Abravanel had a beautiful dream, and because of his dream some people called him a traitor.” In such instances, of which there are not a few, *Judas* reads as the powerful zenith of Oz’s imaginative and persistent interrogation of the toxic mingling of messianism and politics in the Jewish state. Nor is the novel’s enduring resonance limited to that consequential legacy, for Oz had still other irons in the fire of what probably warrants merit as his most socially and politically complex novel.

Given *Judas*’s deep engagement with the ugly distortions at the foundation of Christian anti-Semitism, it shouldn’t surprise that even before its publication, Oz often remarked that the figures of both Jesus and Judas had obsessed him ever since his teenage years as a voracious reader at Hulda. (Intriguingly, this turns out to owe something to his familial past for his great-uncle, the renowned historian Joseph Klausner, aroused heated controversy with his 1921 book *Jesus of Nazareth*, which reclaimed Jesus as a Jewish reformer.) Alternating chapters explore the fruits of Shmuel’s scholarship, the insidious ways that Judas came to be seen as “the incarnation of treachery, the incarnation of Judaism, the incarnation of the connection between Judaism and betrayal” and the “hated archetype of all Jews, in every country and century” in the Christian imagination. But when Shmuel’s research leads him to boldly conclude that Judas was the most *faithful* of Jesus’s disciples it becomes apparent that Oz has not only crafted a subtle allegory linking events in ancient Palestine and the