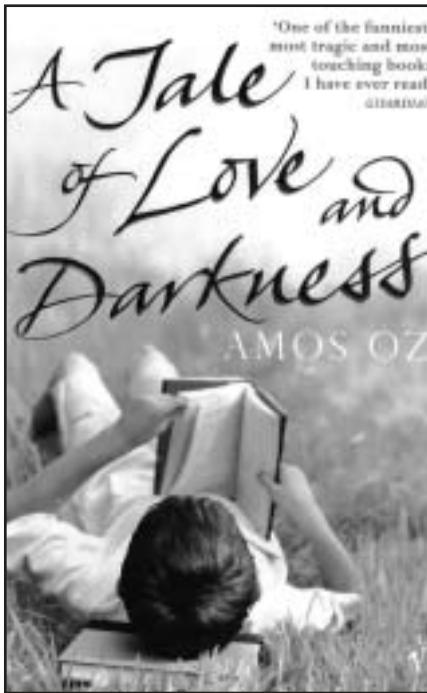


Uncle Vanya Lived Upstairs: Amos Oz's Provincial Jerusalem

Reviewed by Penny Johnson

REVIEWS



Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Vintage 2005). Translated from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange.

In his emotionally charged, if occasionally overwritten, memoir of his childhood and adolescence in Jerusalem in the 1940s and early '50s, Amos Oz reports an April 29, 1948 diary entry by David Ben Gurion assessing Jerusalem's Jewish population: "The elements in Jerusalem: 20% normal people, 20% privileged (university etc) 60% weird (provincial, medieval, etc)."

A Tale of Love and Darkness is firmly situated in the territory of the weird and provincial, although young Amos and his parents, Fania and Arie Klausner, cast longing glances at the normal and privileged. Born in Jerusalem in 1939 and perhaps the leading Israeli writer of his generation, Oz grew up in the lower middle-class Kerem Avraham neighborhood where his family lived multiple exiles, from Poland, from the Russian and German languages, from European culture, and—of interest here—from other Jerusalems. This makes for an uneasy and even claustrophobic provincialism that Oz captures in a masterful fashion from the standpoint of a lonely and word-struck child listening to endless conversations.

His parents speak in a medley of languages of the belfries, ancient, town squares, deep forests and snow-covered meadows of Europe amid the “parched hillsides” of Jerusalem. His neighbours—clerks, grade school teachers, minor bureaucrats and small shopkeepers—review the events of the day. The world beyond Jerusalem was generally known as “theworldatlarge” and was seen at once as highly attractive and intractably hostile and dangerous.

This is a Jerusalem of suffocating summers and damp winters, of drab meals of sardines and hard bread and many recipes featuring squash, of the disappointed ambitions of Oz’s father, whose degree from the University of Vilna—and his own narrow pendantism—could not compete with the more prestigious credentials of others at the new Hebrew University. Oz’s Jerusalem is haunted by Odessa, Rovno, Prague, and Berlin and, above all, by a disappointed love for Europe and the disaster unfolding there. Indeed, the right-wing politics of Oz’s father and other relatives, supporters of Jabotinsky and Begin, are infused by a familiar, if lethal, combination of European romanticism and nationalism. At times, the family’s Eurocentrism can turn comic. Although her husband had been writing romantic poems of Zionism in Palestine while still in Odessa, Oz’s grandmother Sholomit’s first words off the boat from Jaffa, after a “startled glance” around her, were “The Levant is full of germs.” (She then proceeds to follow a routine of three Lysol-infused baths a day.)

From their dreary neighbourhood, Oz’s parents dreamed of other Jerusalems where European culture and comforts prevailed:

The Jerusalem my parents looked up to lay far from the areas where we lived; it was in leafy Rehavia with its gardens and its strain of piano music.... It didn’t exist where we were. Kerem Avraham, the area where we lived, belonged to Chekhov.

Oz’s marriage of Chekhov characters and his Jerusalem neighbourhood is one of the book’s passages which spark delight and recognition. The petty failures, monotonous lives, and stunted hopes of Chekhov’s characters stuck in the Russian provinces echo a continent and a half century away—and indeed may still walk the streets of some Jerusalem neighbourhoods today. For Oz, it was an immediate affinity: “Years later, when I read Chekhov (in Hebrew translation) I was convinced he was one of us: Uncle Vanya lived right upstairs from us, Doctor Samoylenko bent over me.”

Oz’s own family saga centres on his mother Fania’s loneliness, illness, depression, and eventual suicide. It is, in turn, searing and angry, gentle and ironic. His telling of this tale follows a long silence. Oz and his father, generally a compulsive explainer, “never talked about his mother. Not a word.” and Oz himself “hardly ever spoke about my mother till now, till I came to write these pages.” Although Oz does not make the comparison, if Fania herself were a Chekhov character, she could only be Nina in *The Seagull*: frail, simmering with suppressed creativity, longing for other worlds—and doomed.

Oz relates his mother's doom both to the growing tragedy in Europe and the pinched provincial life she is forced to lead in Jerusalem: "My mother grew up surrounded by a cultural mission of misty beauty whose wings were finally dashed on a hot dusty pavement of Jerusalem stone."

The trouble for this reader is not that this profoundly intimate tale is intertwined with the "hot, dusty" alterity of Jerusalem or even with the burdens of exile, history and the unfolding of the Palestine/Israel conflict, for how could it not be? What is problematic, however, is where the point of the view of the present seems to dominate the past—whether it is reading Jewish life in Europe almost solely through the coming horror of World War II and the Holocaust or in the imagining of Mandate-era Jerusalem through the divided city of today.

This inscription of the present onto the past is most problematic in Oz's presentation of the "other Jerusalem" inhabited by Muslims and other "alien" categories. It is a Jerusalem that the young Amos does not inhabit but that seems to be threatened by, interestingly—not because of its singularity—but because of its multiplicity of peoples and voices:

Only in my thoughts could I sometimes go to the extension of St. George's Street north-eastwards, and stare wide-eyed at the other Jerusalem: a city of old cypress trees that were more black than green, streets of stone walls, interlaced grilles, cornices and dark walls, the alien, silent, aloof, shrouded Jerusalem, the Abyssinian, Muslim, pilgrim, Ottoman city, the strange, missionary city of crusaders and Templars, the Greek, Armenian, Italian, brooding, Anglican, Greek Orthodox city, the monastic Coptic, Catholic, Lutheran, Scottish, Sunni, Shiite, Sufi, Alawite city.... A secretive, malign city pregnant with disaster.

It is perhaps telling that the one word he does not utter here is Arab¹, or indeed that the Palestinian Muslim and Christian population are simply part of a list of alien, fragmented identities. This shadowy, other Jerusalem—which Oz himself calls an "opposite Jerusalem"—is, in his imagining, physically, as well as socially, culturally and politically, divided from the Jewish world in which he dwells. It is tempting to see Oz imposing a grid of post-1948 East and West Jerusalem on the Mandate-era city², where one in five inhabitants of the Western neighbourhoods was in fact Arab, one-third of the property in these neighbourhoods was Arab-owned (and much else in church or other foreign hands), and Oz's own Kerem Avraham, in the northwestern part of the city, was relatively close to several Arab villages, including Lifta and Deir Yassin. Indeed, one of the family's idealistic neighbours, a mender of dolls, proposes to walk over to neighbouring villages and declare his peaceful intentions—but is stopped because he doesn't know Arabic.

Oz writes that his story is a “memory of a memory” and that is fair enough. But the narrator is both a master novelist shaping the story and a political activist presenting historical events for a purpose. The novelist and the politician are both present in the only sustained encounter between the child Amos and Palestinians in Jerusalem. As an eight-year-old child in the summer of 1947, Amos accompanies his uncle and aunt on a visit to the mansion of Ustaz Najib Mamduh al-Silawani, a prosperous and educated businessman, in Sheikh Jarrah. The uncle, a post office employee, had tracked down a missing letter that has cleared the name of Silwani’s nephew; thus the invitation. Arriving at the Silwani mansion, we are ushered into a fairy-tale setting, with parrots exchanging gibes in French, English and Arabic, servants offering pomegranate juice and almonds, men in tennis whites, ornate decorations and Damascene swords, and a lush garden outside the windows. The visual precision with which the novelist renders each detail of the visit can be a bit disconcerting—unless one understands that it is in fact a kind of fairy tale³—and one that the child Oz unwittingly shatters.

With some irony, Oz views himself as a child “full of national awareness” going on a “little diplomatic mission” to convince the Arabs of the purity and good intent of the Zionist projects. (His adult relatives are party to this conceit, bringing the Silwanis a photo book of pioneer life on the kibbutz.) He proceeds to the garden to demonstrate his Zionist pioneer prowess in climbing trees, meant to impress the ten-year old Aisha, only to fall and bring a rusty iron chain and ball onto young Awwad, playing below the tree. With Awwad unconscious and his leg bleeding, Amos and his relatives retreat in dismay. This fairytale ends with a crashing reality: before Amos and his relatives could apologize, UNSCOP presented its resolutions to the General Assembly. “[I]t simply was not sensible to go those areas anymore.”

Unlike other cursory references to the Arab population in *A Time of Love and Darkness*, this encounter is fully imagined, but perhaps in more than one sense: as a crucial event for the child Amos, and as a failed encounter between Palestinians and Zionist Jews for the adult author. The Silwanis—and the pretty Aisha with her smouldering eyes who lived in Talbiyeh and played the piano—return in the narrative as a foil, as Oz wonders about their fate (rather curiously he asks if they are in Nablus, London or “the refugee camp at Deheisha”) or hopes for forgiveness. But like a fairy tale, the magical Silwanis have vanished into the mist, and the moral is clear: “It’s gone forever. It cannot be undone.”

The imagining of this encounter has power and resonance, some of which is lost when the territory of the narrative moves to the events of the 1948 War. Oz vividly depicts the experiences of a child surrounded by confused and terrified adults “swept by gossip and false rumours”—and suddenly conversation stops because “the child is here.” But his recounting of the events of the war in Jerusalem and its larger consequences, from the perspective of a narrator, rather than a child, seems curiously unexamined, frozen in time, and largely derived from mainstream Zionist historiography. The large and small experiences of war, from the death of neighbours by sniper fire to the loss of a pet tortoise, are vividly rendered and moving, but there is

a sense that 1948 is a closed, rather than an open, book. Again, it cannot be undone.

When young Amos causes the even younger Awwad to fall from the tree of grace, Amos' repeated refrain is "It's not my fault." Oz's version of the 1948 War seems also this litany writ large: the war and its waging is an unquestioned necessity. After his mother's death, Amos rejects his father's right-wing politics, as well as his sedentary lifestyle, changes his name to Oz ('strength' in Hebrew) and goes off to live a pioneering dream in Kibbutz Hulda. In a wooden episode in a book more characterized by vivid prose, Oz is on night-time guard duty with a grizzled Ur-kibbutznik, Ephraim who challenges Oz's view of Arab *fedayeen* as murderers:

"It's like this," said Ephraim, "it's really very simple. Where is the Jewish people's land if not here? Under the sea?... Vell, maybe you happen to have forgotten that in '48 they had a go at killing all of us? Then in '48 there was a terrible war, and they themselves made it a simple question of either them or us, and we won and took it from them. It's nothing to boast about... And because we have something now, we mustn't take anything else from them. That's it. And that's the whole difference between me and your Mr. Begin. If we take even more from them some day, now that we already have something, that will be a very big sin."

When Oz asks what the two guards should do if the fedayeen show up, Ephraim replies that they must lie in the mud and shoot them but not "because they are a nation of murderers." This down-home version of "shoot and cry" and "we mustn't take anything else" would be almost satiric if it was not so close to the discourse of the Israeli Zionist peace camp of which Oz is a doyen and senior statesman. It seems a far too simple philosophy for the writer of a very complicated tale of love and darkness.

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Endnotes

¹ Elsewhere in the book, Oz offers another description of the "opposite Jerusalem" as a "veiled city" that is "menacing yet fascinating". He presents this city as "Abyssinian, Arab, pilgrim, Ottoman, missionary, German, Greek, Armenian, American, monastic Italian, Russian Jerusalem."

² Thanks to Rema Hammami for illuminating this point.

³ Although Oz goes back to the Silwani mansion after the 1967 War (where he finds that the villa is a foreign consulate), it is unclear whether Ustaz Silwani is a pseudonym or even a mistaken identity. Several Jerusalemites who grew up in the eastern part of the city cannot remember such a prominent family or a import-export business called Silwani and Sons.