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Review of *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, by Amos Oz, Translated from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange, Harcourt, Inc., New York: 2005

*A Tale of Love and Darkness* is a memoir – and more than a memoir -- by the noted Israeli novelist Amos Oz. It is a family history, an account of the early years before the establishment of the state of Israel, and an account of childhood trauma. Exquisitely crafted, heart-breakingly poignant, rich with detail, the memoir is structured to convey actual states of trauma. The structure of the memoir replicates the defensive patterns of dissociation and avoidance, replicates the mind's attempt to deal with the paradox of needing to acknowledge overwhelming trauma while simultaneously escaping awareness of the traumatic experience.

Oz engages us on all fronts. He presents significant events of childhood, with the details that matter to a child. He describes a family of extremely accomplished and brilliant people, going back several generations, in such a compelling fashion that the reader could imagine the narrator was omnipresent. He introduces us to the Jerusalem of his family and their milieu, refugees and intellectuals. He describes the pioneers of Israel, the tough kibbutzim and fighters, alien to the cultured Eurocentric world of his family. He explores the schism between religious and secular Jews, in their interchanges and disaffections. And he subtly leads us into the world of Jewish-Arab relations, the perceptions and misperceptions of twinned peoples in conflict with each other.

He begins his narrative with a description of the hand-to-mouth poverty in which he and his family lived, and with their yearning for a life of European culture and bourgeois security. His father could read sixteen or seventeen languages and could speak eleven. Both parents were college graduates. He describes not only their lives, but, using the reminiscences of his Aunt Sofia, the lives of his family in Europe. And from his description of their lives comes a history of values, collisions of cultures, bittersweet memories of lost worlds, annihilated families, a European Jewry destroyed, a nostalgia, a love, a rage for what was lost, and a determination to remember. Like Eli Wiesel, he will not let what was lost go unforgotten.

And thus his narrative is packed with an abundance of physical detail – let nothing that was abandoned or smashed or stolen or sold or relinquished be forgotten. Mirrors, rugs, books in many languages and many alphabets, gold-rimmed spectacles, paper clips, bug spray, olive trees, cypresses, silk scarves, rain, all to be named, evoked, so that a lost past can be preserved in some form, in some way. Preserved in words.

The memoir circles upon itself. The narrative interrupts itself. We follow the lives of European forebears, the lives of his parents' contemporaries, philosophical discussions and disagreements. We learn of Oz's childhood concerns and struggles, his embarrassments and disappointments, and through the intensity of his childhood

encounters, we learn about issues with broader significance to others. To give a flavor of the circular structure and the balance between his child's vision and worldly concerns, I will cite an event that had long term implications for him in terms of shame and awe. More than 300 pages into the memoir he describes a visit his family makes to a wealthy and sophisticated Arab family, when he was eight years old. His uncle describes the visit as similar to a diplomatic mission. His family is uneasy and insecure. Young Oz is awed by the luxurious appointments, and enchanted by a young girl who writes poetry. And in his eagerness to impress this girl he shows off his physical prowess. "For sixty generations, so we had learned, they had considered us a miserable nation of huddled yeshiva students, flimsy moths who start in a panic at every shadow, *awlad al-mawt*, children of death, and now at last here was muscular Judaism taking the stage, the resplendent new Hebrew youth at the height of his powers, making everyone who sees him tremble at his roar: like a lion among lions" (p. 327). The "resplendent new Hebrew youth" winds up terribly injuring the adored young girl's baby brother, and the girl, who was responsible for the brother's well-being, is beaten, "not punching her with his fists, not slapping her cheeks, but hitting her hard, repeatedly, with the flat of his hand, slowly, thoroughly, on her head, her back, her shoulder, across her face, not the way you punish a child but the way you vent your rage on a horse. Or an obstinate camel" (p. 329). In a parenthetical aside in the midst of telling this painful memory, Oz relates this moment of intense trauma to an event when he was much younger, in which he mistakes a woman who is a dwarf for a little girl, and then flees in horror from her and winds up lost and trapped in a dark room in a clothing store. The winding back quality of the narrative structure, which relates one mistake to another mistake, one childhood trauma to another childhood trauma, hints at how trauma accumulates and is reinforced, how the dominant overwhelming emotions of fear and shame linger and shape the personality. And perhaps most importantly, this narrative structure curling back on itself sets up the way Oz deals with the most important trauma of his life, his mother's death, at age 38, when he was 12 and a half years old.

A number of times in his memoir Oz approaches the fact of his mother's death, the events of his mother's death. He hints at what happened, and then backs away. We feel the force of the memory, his horror and dismay and grief, and we feel the power of avoiding addressing the "what really happened."

Here is what the adult narrator says of the 12 year old boy: "In the weeks and months that followed my mother's death I did not think for a moment of her agony. I made myself deaf to the unheard cry for help that remained behind her and that may have always hung in the air of our apartment. There was not a drop of compassion in me. Nor did I miss her. I did not grieve my mother's death: I was too hurt and angry for any other emotion to remain" (p. 211). And then: "As I stopped hating my mother, I began to hate myself" (p. 212). Oz describes the what ifs and if onlys of remorse, of guilt, as the boy struggles with his feelings of helplessness in the face of death.

And, interestingly, it is only after exploring these feelings that the narrator embarks on a description of his earliest memories, on page 217. As if his mother's death leads him back to his birth, not the actual physical birth, but the birth of a self-awareness that comes

alive with words, a self that can be remembered because it can be described. As if his yearning for his mother, his rage at her for dying, his conversion of his rage at her into the self-hatred of guilt and regret, leads him back to his origins, to his first memories, the first two of being with his mother, and the last of being alone and trapped, the way he was when he was chased by the “little girl” “old lady” dwarf.

Our human ability to metaphorize, to analogize, to remember and interpret by association, is reflected in the helical and labyrinthine structure of this memoir. The craft of putting together the memoir is one of linkage, of linking without linearity. Rather, the linkage is the logic of dream, of free association, of the vagaries of memory.

On page 501 Oz reports, “A week or so before her death my mother suddenly got much better. A new sleeping pill prescribed by a new doctor worked miracles overnight.” On page 506, “We sat for half an hour or so in a German Jewish café.... Till the rain stopped. Meanwhile, Mother took a little powder compact and a comb from her handbag.... I felt a mixture of emotions: pride at her looks, joy that she was better, responsibility to guard and protect her from some shadow whose existence I could only guess at. In fact I did not guess, I only half sensed a slight strange uneasiness in my skin. The way a child sometimes grasps without really grasping things that are beyond his understanding, senses them and is alarmed without knowing why:

‘Are you all right, Mother?’ “

Opposite page 508 is a photograph of Oz and his parents.

And it is not until page 531, in a memoir of 538 pages, that we learn how Oz’s mother died.

Throughout the memoir, Oz refers to his mother’s death. He leads up to it, and circles away. We travel these circuitous routes with him, because he had to, and therefore we have to, to discover what it was that a twelve year old child, burdened with the heavy past of his parents, his ancestors, his nation, could not shoulder, could not address.

Oz’s narrative structure is similar to the psychoanalytic work we do with traumatized people. We hear fragments, we travel circular paths with people who need to circle around, and we wait. We wait for the act of personal narration to lead to the possibility of putting into words what could never be said.