Reading a Biography of Ezra Pound in the Garden

Wet, limp, as if just born, the five petals un-stick
from each other. *I have blundered always,*
writes Ezra Pound. The hot winds of Venice
blow past my bare ankles, a cat sprawls on its side
across the lawn. *How does humanity withstand it,*
the heat he might mean, too much going on
and much of it boring. He writes: *I am homesick*
after my own kind. The zucchini, everyone
knows, is prolific. While my guests come and go,
pilfering my time, it offers one green fruit a day,
and these flowers like lap cloths unfolded.
Could it be that I have given another summer away,
intent on my own distractibility, the flowers
like tiles in a Cordovan kitchen or the American
orange color of margarine? The precision it requires
to translate the lyric, the Greek hexameter,
the ancient Chinese character—I am so used
to the open that, when I go inside, I leave
all the house-doors ajar. Life, Pound told his daughter,
must always involve suffering. It exists
in order to make people think. Fact: the forest
begins at the end of my porch. Trees circle
the house like a choir. Oh, the west,
it turns the green orange-rose, allows the pines
to stand and move forward. When did he give up
his summer for his winter name? Are the cycles
of weather eternal? Grass, the wild raspberry,
everything is shorn by the deer or heat or wind.
The path I walk is dry and apparent now.
How could we not be human when it is this August
wind that prepares us, when we can't stomach
one more sweet grain? Look, how the spring-rocks
have grown a coat of lichen. Nature—he calls it time—
winds its way into the alley-space. Season,
a word that means *to sow.* If we didn't know
that the days would string together,
that what isn't finished today would have its bloom?
I can't make it cohere, the poet writes in his *Cantos,*
fruit coming so thick he couldn't possibly use it,
overfilling the tin bucket by the back door.

—Melissa Kwasny

Disentangled from Redemption

Gideon Lewis-Kraus

A Tale of Love and Darkness
by Amos Oz.
Harcourt, 2005,
$16.00 paper.

MANY ADMIRERS of Amos Oz's widely celebrated memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, have pointed out that the book's great achievement is, given its scope, its coherence: it is a family saga about a migration from Eastern Europe to Palestine under the British Mandate, and the psychological migration from Mandatory Palestine to young Israel; it is a tragedy of an unhappy marriage and a mother's suicide; it is an intimate history of an inchoate and besieged nation; and it is a Bildungsroman (for this part, especially, feels more novelistic than autobiographical) of a young writer's literary unfolding. It is a sprawling, sad, warmly comic book of rare emotional depth, and one would be hard-pressed to oversing its praises, but the consensus critical formulation seems to me to have gotten the book's performance precisely backwards. It is not that Oz has taken these stories and contrived to wrap, braid, or quilt them together; threading and sewing are the wrong metaphors. He has, instead, chosen to write about about a particular place in time—Jerusalem in the Forties and Fifties—where all of these stories, in and of themselves, dovetailed, and trace the political and emotional implications of their convergence.

Oz's mother, Fania Mussman, came from a wealthy family in Rovno, a town in what was then Eastern Poland (now Ukraine). After studying literature in Prague, where she may or may not have had a mysterious and torrid love affair, she came to join her family in Palestine in the early Thirties. Oz's father, Yehuda Arieh Klausner, came from a distinguished family of scholars and literary sorts in Odessa, where they hosted a fashionable Hebrew salon. Both of Oz's parents, like any educated, secular Jewish European, spoke a dozen languages, and Arieh could read a half-dozen more. The patriarch of the Klausner family was Arieh's Uncle Joseph, a venerated professor of literature and history at Hebrew University. Joseph Klausner had militant right-wing Revisionist Zionist sympathies; he taught his family to yearn for the day the Jewish state might become a "lion among the lions." Fania was beautiful and brilliant and moody, and, for most of Oz's youth, sick-minded: the book's ostensibly digressive structure eventually finds itself looping a tight spiral toward her suicide. Arieh, a career librarian who longed to be recognized as a thinker in the tradition of his famous uncle, was rational and optimistic to a fault. Unable to express or articulate feelings, Arieh forced silence away with awkward and unfunny wordplay, or endless discursions on etymology or politics. Oz must have been angry with his father for a long time, but now has mustered the sympathy to understand him as somewhat emotionally hapless and clumsy rather than cruelly out of touch. Oz locates his parents on opposite sides of the European spectrum:

> Both my parents had come to Jerusalem straight from the nineteenth century. My father had grown up on a concentrated diet of operatic, nationalistic, battle-thirsty romanticism (the Springtime of Nations, Sturm und Drang), whose marzipan peaks were sprinkled, like a glass of champagne, with the virile frenzy of Nietzsche. My mother, on the other hand, lived by the other Romantic canon, the introspective, melancholy menu of loneliness in a minor key, soaked in the suffering of the broken-hearted, soulful outcasts, infused with vague autumnal scents of fin-de-siècle decadence.

Father recited stories of the "poet-worker-revolutionary," the New Hebrew Man, his "fire-hardened heroism," his deep bronze tan and muscular Judaism, the blood-lusty promise of redress. Mother spun for her son dreamy tales of dwarfing landscapes—the dark woods and snowy steppes of a mythologized Eastern Europe—and the supernatural forces at work there. These were stories "of evil," Oz writes, "but also of pity and compassion."

These two mismatched souls were plunged into the disarray of the Kerem Avraham (Abraham's Vineyard) section of Jerusalem, an unfashionable neighborhood crowded with "minor bureaucrats in the Jewish Agency, or teachers, nurses, writers, drivers, shorthand typists, world reformers, translators, shop assistants, theorists, librarians, bank tellers or cinema ticket sellers, ideologues, small shopkeepers, lonely old bachelors who lived on their meager savings." Lists such as these, a common trope in the memoir, mimic the flattening of desert Palestine, where an unwelcoming environment, the daily hardscrabble, and shared political struggle vitiated the class distinctions of Europe.

Amos Oz—né Klausner—was born amid this gregarious throng in 1939, and grew up in a basement flat. He was a bright and imaginative only child who staged weeklong war games with household detritus, turned a broken refrigerator into a rocket aimed at London, and read at least a novel a day, not to mention whatever newspapers he could get his hands on. It was a pressured, heady atmosphere for a child, especially a precocious one. Jerusalem under the Mandate was a bursting promise: his parents and their generation had been weaned on Zionist anthems that proclaimed "there in the land our fathers loved, all our hopes will be fulfilled. There to live in liberty, there to flourish, pure and free." Kerem Avraham, especially in the light of these old songs, was squalid and mean, and

their small apartment shuddered with deferrals and disappointments. His father's patriotism grew more ardent and personal. His mother's compensatory gloom grew more stifling and intractable. The child, in turn, grew more expansive: the stories he told, the poems he wrote, the dramas he enacted all partook of his father's meek and desperate heroicism and his mother's romantic escapes.

The birth of the State of Israel and the War of Independence, in 1948, was a much-needed emotional release for Oz, his parents, and their community: never again, his father promised him on the night of the United Nations vote, would they be persecuted for being Jews. They hoped the unexpected victory over the Arabs would usher in the historical discontinuity they'd dreamed of. But the charged emotions of military victory foundered on the postwar scarcity; life returned to its prewar tawdriness, its strangling unrelief. For months, Fania did little more than sit by a small window all day. Oz and his father became as close as they ever would be as they jointly tried to improve her spirits. They held businesslike staff meetings each night, checking errands off of long lists and planning strategy. Oz writes that it felt like two people carrying a stretcher together. Oz's mother would kill herself in her sister's Tel Aviv apartment in January 1952, a few months before his bar mitzvah. Oz's father retreated into his customary distance; he would survive for another twenty years, living to see his son become the most famous novelist in Israel, and the two would not mention her once. At the age of fourteen, Amos Klausner would leave his remarried father's house, change his name to Amos Oz—which means "strength" or "vigor" in Hebrew—and move to Kibbutz Hulda, where he abjured his right-wing associations and tried to reinvent himself as one of the socialist youths of the field and the vineyard. He would live on the kibbutz, plowing his substantial literary earnings back into the common fund, for two decades.

WHAT THESE stories share—the emigration from mannered Europe to the "pervasive sensuality of the Levant," the birth of Israel, the disintegration of his parents' marriage and his mother's suicide, and his aesthetic initiations—is a political eroticism. The Jerusalem of the Thirties and Forties had little room for distinctions between public and private. Personal humiliations—grade-school anti-Semites on playgrounds in Poland, failures of professional ambition—would be healed by national triumph, as the sickly and pale Eastern European Jew was supplanted by the "muscular, silent, brave, and bronzed" Israeli Hebrew. The bourgeois chill of Europe would be flash-heated by the "seductive sensual charms" of the East. Like his use of the leitmotiv (when Arieh appears he always "chased away the silence"; Grandma Shlomit had her "war on germs"), Oz's repetition of these words—brave, bronzed, sensual, muscular—is meant to be incantatory, to give his readers the sense of hypnosis that pervaded his parents' generation. His parents had a sexual attachment to the founding of the state, a sexual stake in its military potency.

And adolescent Oz had a sexual stake in it, as well. He was aware enough to know that the "courageous, rugged pioneers, who had succeeded in making friends with the darkness of night," had "overstepped every limit, too, as regards relations between a boy and a girl and vice versa." A staple of every Bildungsroman since *Portrait of the Artist* has been the link between sexual awakening and aesthetic emergence; the additional dimension for Oz, the dimension that makes this book as necessary as it is beautiful, is that these two were also welded to the power of the new state.

The only figure in Oz's life who holds out, the only person who will not allow her private terrors and passions to be subsumed by public campaigns, is Oz's mother. She seems to be the only adult in Kerem Avraham to recognize that this overidentification, this trembling sensuous overlap between public and private, is the Nazi dream and the Nazi error. She tells Oz pointed stories of Pandora's box, hoping that in her oblique way she might impart the lesson that the state cannot be the province of the innermost. For her, the costs ultimately became too high. She could no longer bear the weight of so much privacy. But for her the tragic option was the only viable one: she could not contribute to the blurring. The more public-spirited and strident her husband and his deafening family became, the more self-protective and removed she forced herself to be. Oz set himself to the task of negotiating an internal compromise his parents could not invent between them: between his father's public love and private darkness, his mother's private love and public darkness.

It is a hilarious confusion of the political and the erotic that finally provides for Oz's conversion experience. He is ten or eleven years old, and his Grandpa Alexander has taken him to a packed auditorium to hear Menachem Begin speak. Begin had been the underground leader of the Irgun, the anti-British terrorist organization responsible for, among other things, the bombing at the King David Hotel. Now, after the war, he was the leader of the Herut party and an avatar of the militant Revisionist movement. For the Klausners, who loathed Ben-Gurion and made Munich references as often as they could, Begin was a hero.

Begin was a small man but a fiery orator, and his speeches were powerful. On that day, he had chosen to talk about the arms race in the Middle East. Oz explains that there was a cultural divide between those, such as Begin, who had learned their Hebrew from books and those, such as Oz, who had grown up speaking the language of the street. To younger ears, the Biblical word that Begin and his generation took to mean "arm" or "weapon" meant only one thing: the male sexual organ. And the corresponding verb "to arm" meant only "to fuck." So when Begin cried out that "President Eisenhower is arming the Nasser regime! Bulganin is arming Nasser! Guy Mollet and Anthony Eden are arming Nasser!! The whole world is arming our Arab enemies day and night!!!...But who will arm the government of Ben-Gurion?" young Amos Klausner, hard as he tried, could not contain peals of laughter. His mortified grandfather dragged him out of the auditorium and slapped him senseless. "I have never again blended into an ecstatic crowd, or been a blind molecule in a gigantic superhuman body," Oz writes, grateful that this linguistic double entendre saved him from the single-entendre life he might have led. The title of his great-uncle Joseph Klausner's autobiography is *My Road to Resurrection and Redemption*. On that day, Oz muses, "I seem to have begun running away from resurrection and redemption. I am still running." To believe in resurrection and redemption is to believe that a state—swept through by a firebrand, welded together with erotic charge—can obviate the personal. His mother encased herself to death in the hope he might disentangle himself from this belief. He has written this book for those who are still tangled.□

Becoming the Hand of John Speed

How do you make a nation?
How do you make it answer to you?
How do you make its paths, its waterways
its wished-for blueness at the horizon point
take heed?

I have no answer. I was born in a nation
I had no part in making.

But sometimes late at night when I want to imagine
what it was to be a part of it
I take down my book and then I am

the agile mapping hand of John Speed
etching *The Kingdome of Ireland, 1612*,

my pen moving over a swerve of contour,
my ink stroke adding an acre of ocean:

The Dublin hills surrender two dimensions.
Forests collapse, flattening all their wolves.

The Irish sea
cedes its ancient tensions,
its gannets, gulls, cormorants all stopped
from flying away by their own silhouettes—

and you might say my nation has become
all but unrecognizable, but no

I remember the way it was when I was young,
wanting the place to know me at first glance
and it never did,
it never did, and so

this is the way to have it, cut to size,
its waters burned in copper, its air unbreathed
its future neighborhoods almost all unnamed—

and even the old, ocean-shaped horizon
surprised by its misshapen accuracy—

ready and flat and yearning to be claimed.

—Eavan Boland