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JACOB KABAKOFF



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David Grossman's Useful Fictions

WRITING SOME THIRTY years ago, the leading practitioner of what the French then called the *nouveau roman*, Alain Robbe-Grillet, published a book of essays on the nature of his craft. What was innovative about the program outlined in *For a New Novel* were not Robbe-Grillet's repeated assertions about the inviolability of art, on the order of: "if art is something, it is *everything*,"¹ or, "art cannot be reduced to the status of a means in the service of a cause which transcends it" (Robbe-Grillet, p. 37). After all, at that time, "art for art's sake" had existed in France for over a hundred years.

What was interesting about Robbe-Grillet's essays was that one sensed a feeling of discomfort on the part of the essayist with the notion of the "disengagement" of art from human concerns. Robbe-Grillet hinted somewhat paradoxically that a work of art that does not somehow serve human needs stands as little chance of surviving the ages as does a work of propaganda — which has only political goals. If the artist remains true to his calling as an artist, then, almost magically, "by means of an obscure and remote consequence," the work of art will some day be useful for something, "perhaps even the Revolution" (Robbe-Grillet, p. 41).

Curiously, ten years later, American-Jewish novelist Cynthia Ozick, in a paper delivered in Israel, outlined a program for a *nouveau roman juif*, a new Jewish novel in the Diaspora. She herself called this novel not "*nouveau*" but "liturgical," that is, one that speaks with a Jewish communal voice, derives from the Jewish textual tradition, and sings the song of Jewish values. Like Robbe-Grillet, Ozick told her audience, she had once believed that either art is everything or it is nothing. Until very

1. Alain Robbe-Grillet. *For a New Novel*. New York: Grove Press, 1965, p. 43. Originally published as *Pour un nouveau roman*, Editions de Minuit, 1963.

recently she said, "my whole life had been given over to the religion of Art, which is the religion of the Gentile nations — I had no other aspiration, no other commitment, was zealous for no other creed."² But she has since become Judaized, she says in her paper. Lashing out at Robbe-Grillet's contention that the novel can by its very nature be about nothing but itself, she calls for "the novel as a Jewish force," one that judges and interprets the world, in which authors write "of conduct and of the consequences of conduct" (Ozick, p. 164). In 1970, Ozick spoke specifically of a Jewish Diaspora literature based in America; she concerned herself little with Israeli literature.

GROSSMAN AND THE WRITER'S JOB

David Grossman, the newest and brightest star on Israel's literary horizon, takes up the debate on the usefulness of fiction, idiosyncratically, to be sure, out of the depths of Israel's historical experience. Born in 1954, Grossman likes to remind his readers that he belongs to the generation that became *bar mitzvah* during the time of the Six-Day War in 1967 and that he therefore has a unique perspective on the consequences of that war, one that reflects and might even represent the concerns of his contemporaries.

Intellectually, Grossman's was a generation that was strongly influenced by French authors Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, both writers for whom literature was to be not *moralizing* but *moral*, a type of writing "which claimed only," as Robbe-Grillet says in dissent, "to awaken political awareness by stating the problems of our society, but which would escape the spirit of propaganda by returning the reader to his liberty" (Robbe-Grillet, p. 43). Grossman himself has written in that same spirit, stating that "the writer's job . . . is to put a finger on the wound, to write anew, in a language that the reader has not yet learned to insulate himself against, about the intricacies of the existing situation, to shatter stereotypes that make it easy not to deal with problems. The writer's job is to remind those who have

2. Cynthia Ozick. "Toward a New Yiddish." Talk delivered at the Weizmann Institute, in Rehovoth, Israel in 1970. Printed in Ozick's *Art & Ardor*, New York: Knopf, 1983, p. 157.

forgotten that humanity and morality are still important questions and to warn of the future implied by the present."³

For several years, Grossman earned his living as a lively, entertaining, and insightful commentator on Israel Radio. When he stepped down some four years ago, he already had a burgeoning career as a Hebrew writer, having published a book of short stories, two novels, and a series of magazine articles on life in the West Bank that were to become a controversial political book. Most recently, Grossman has published a play and a third novel.⁴ Of his six books, the three that have appeared in English,⁵ *The Smile of the Lamb*, *See Under: Love*, and *The Yellow Wind* have earned him almost unanimous critical acclaim in the United States. When, for example, what is considered his literary masterpiece, *See Under: Love*, was published in America in 1989, it was received by reviewers as "a major Israeli novel," "a dazzling work of the imagination," and "a worthy successor to works of similar mythic dimension by William Faulkner, Günter Grass, and Gabriel García Márquez." What distinguished that complicated and difficult novel was Grossman's innovative artistic imagination and his very Jewish insistence that the arts of make-believe may be the most efficient instrument of redemption available, on both a historical and a personal scale.

FICTION IN THE YELLOW WIND

Nowhere is Grossman's *need* for fiction more prominently displayed than in his non-fiction, specifically in *The Yellow Wind*,

3. David Grossman. *The Yellow Wind*. Trans. by Haim Watzman. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988. (Referred to in the body of the text as *TYW*.) This quotation comes from the Introduction to the paperback edition (Delta, 1989), pages un-numbered.
4. Grossman's Hebrew works are published in Israel by Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad. They include: *Ratz* (*The Jogger*, stories), 1983; *Hiyukh Ha-Gedi* (*The Smile of the Lamb*, a novel), 1983; *Ayein Erekh: Ahava* (*See Under: Love*, a novel), 1986; *Ha-Zeman Ha-Tzahov* (*The Yellow Wind*, essays), 1987; *Gan Riki* (*Riki's Kindergarten*, a play), 1988; and *Sefer Ha-Dikduk Ha-Penimi* (*The Book of Interior Grammar*, a novel), 1991.
5. Grossman's American publishers are Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. Publication dates of the novels, trans. by Betsy Rosenberg, are: *See Under: Love*, 1989, and *The Smile of the Lamb*, 1990. (This last is referred to in the body of the text as *SOL*.)

his 1988 journalistic reportage on the West Bank, or, depending on one's politics, the area of Judea and Samaria. One's politics aside, a significant quirk of *The Yellow Wind* is Grossman's intercalation into his reportage of a short piece of fiction, a story called "Swiss Mountain View." One analyst of *The Yellow Wind* singles out this chapter for special attention and comes to the conclusion that "as a unique instance of deviation from the journalistic reportage, the fictional mode of this chapter underscores the centrality of its vision."⁶ Fiction, apparently, has a power — the power to crystallize and convey one's truths — that even truth itself does not have.

"Swiss Mountain View," the intercalated story in question, tells the tale of Gidi, the Israeli civil administrator of a West Bank Arab village. Six years earlier, just after the Six-Day War, when he was an army officer in charge of the village's occupation, Gidi had invented a fiction designed to ingratiate himself with the villagers. He passed himself off as "Abu Dani," using an Arabic honorific signifying that he was a family man like the villagers, the father of a first-born son named Dani. It turns out that Gidi was not even married at the time and that, only yesterday, his wife of four years had given birth to their first son. On the day of the story's action, Gidi returns to the village after a six months leave.

The story revolves around Gidi's need to tell the truth to the villagers, to whom he had come to feel quite close. His dilemma is two-fold: How can he tell the truth without losing the villagers' good-will? And how can he purify their relationship, corrupted by the telling of the lie, except by telling the truth?

The story recounts Gidi's passage among the villagers as he tries to decide to whom he will break the news first. It tells of his reactions to and assessments of the people under his administration. The spotlight falls, finally, on Abu Khatem, the richest of the villagers, who, since the occupation, has remained aloof, a recluse in his house on the hill. As Gidi enters the house, he sees a painting on the wall, "a huge Swiss mountain view, complete with peaceful stream, a snow-covered alp, and green-

6. Rachel Feldhay Brenner. "The Anatomy of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Universalism and Particularism in David Grossman's *The Yellow Wind*. *Shofar* 8(1990):33.

ery" (*TYW*, p. 140). Apparently, this painting represents an interior reduplication⁷ of Abu Khatem's frame of mind; it reflects his cold, idyllic neutrality and his disengagement from the battle with the Israelis. He will be neither a collaborator nor a combatant; he will be a Swiss mountain.

Gidi admires Abu Khatem's stance and feels "a strange surge of compassion for this stern-faced ascetic man sitting silently opposite him, a sort of pleasant burning sensation in the depths of his lungs as if something of the Swiss mountain air from the great wall picture had made its way into them" (*TYW*, p. 141). The story ends as Gidi ponders in sorrow the moral lesson he has learned from his day in the village. He has learned the simple truth "that when two apples touch one another at a single point of decay, the mold spreads over both of them" (*TYW*, p. 144).

Just as the painting had leapt out of its frame into the "real life" situation of Gidi and Abu Khatem, so, too, does the story "Swiss Mountain View" leap onto the pages of journalistic reportage of *The Yellow Wind*. The story is strategically placed to introduce two crucial non-fiction chapters of Grossman's books, one dealing with a prominent Palestinian lawyer-writer, Raj'a Shehade, the other with the father of an Arab terrorist.

SAINT OR ANTI-SEMITE?

On the surface, Shehade seems to possess the nobility of Abu Khatem. The author of a book called *The Third Way*, Shehade explains his stance thus: "Of the two ways open to me as a Palestinian — to surrender to the occupation and collaborate with it, or to take up arms against it, two possibilities which mean, to my mind, losing one's humanity — I choose the third way. To remain here" (*TYW*, p. 146).⁸ Shehade's stance seems heroic in the extreme. In its refusal to make a tragic choice,

7. The best introduction to the literary technique of interior reduplication is Bruce Morrisette's "Un Héritage d'André Gide: la duplication intérieure." *Comparative Literature Studies* 8(1971):125-42.

8. It is perhaps instructive that two editions of this book have been published by an Israeli house: Raja Shehadeh. *The Third Way*. Jerusalem: Adam Publishers, 1982; reprinted as *Samed: Journal of a West Bank Palestinian*. New York: Adama Books, 1984.

it even appears to mirror the Jewish ethical stance which preaches survival at (almost) any cost.

A problem arises, however, when the real hero, modeled on the book's fictional one, turns out to have a real life with real opinions. Ironically, Grossman, in his need to have a hero, does not seem to notice that in painting Shehade's heroic stance he is at the same time painting the portrait of a hateful racist.

Shehade makes sweeping, recognizably anti-Semitic, generalizations. "The Israelis," he says, "are rude, noisy, vulgar, and uncultured, *as they are everywhere*" (TYW, p. 150, my emphasis). He has also somehow discovered that "here in Israel, there is no civilization" (TYW, p. 155), of all things. In a novel anti-Semitic twist, he attacks Hebrew as the language of an inferior culture. After all, he asserts, Hebrew has absorbed more Arabic words than Palestinian Arabic has absorbed Hebrew words. Far from demonstrating the cultural poverty of Hebrew, this phenomenon might just as easily be interpreted as displaying the openness of Hebrew speakers to the "other," and their efforts to try to understand and assimilate the other's culture. Does it not at least border on linguistic racism to blame Hebrew for Arabic's unwillingness to assimilate it? Finally, Shehade's racism reveals itself even in his most philo-Semitic utterances. "At the beginning," he avers, "I believed the Israelis were a sort of new race" (TYW p. 152).

The problem, however, lies, not with Shehade, but with Grossman's apparently naive acceptance, without comment, of Shehade's outrageous fictions. He places the blame for Shehade's vitriol on Israel's actions, and by so doing chooses to avoid a truism about anti-Semitism: that anti-Semitism is not a function of what Jews do or do not do. Is it possible that, in his need to find someone on the model of his own fictional Abu Khatem to admire, he has remained deaf to the meaning of Shehade's diatribe against the Jews? When, in the next chapter, Grossman paints the portrait of the father of an Arab terrorist, he finally comes to his senses. After presenting Mohammed Ali's similarly outrageous statements about Israelis, without comment, Grossman steps back to assert his own value system: "I could not find in myself any sympathy at all for Ali Al-Kalileh's father, lamenting his son. . . . I reserve my sympathy for the real victims, for his son's victims" (TYW, p. 191).

This statement does not perhaps entirely redeem Grossman's

earlier journalistic portraiture. One would nevertheless find it difficult to quarrel with his statement about the uses to which he would like his writing to be put. Time and again, Grossman will assert in *The Yellow Wind* that he has extremely modest moral goals. Like Katzman, a central figure in Grossman's 1983 novel, *The Smile of the Lamb*, Grossman shies away from absolutes. "I do not seek pure justice, nor the settling of historical accounts," he maintains, "but rather possible life, no more than imperfect and tolerable, causing as little injustice as possible" (*TYW*, p. 41).

It is not surprising that *The Yellow Wind* — which posits a moralistic use for fiction — should bring us back to Grossman's earlier book, *The Smile of the Lamb*, a novel in which the author tries to work out the complicated moral dilemmas with which his society is faced. Grossman himself makes the transition for us when he relates, toward the end of *The Yellow Wind*, that

Seven years ago, I felt that I had to write something about the occupation. I could not understand how an entire nation like mine, an enlightened nation by all accounts, is able to train itself to live as a conqueror without making its own life wretched. . . . For two years I sat and worked out those thoughts and dilemmas of mine. I wrote a novel, *The Smile of the Lamb*, and the more I wrote, the more I understood that the occupation is a continuing and stubborn test for both sides trapped in it. It is the sphinx lying at the entrance to each of us, demanding that we give a clear answer. That we take a stand and make a decision. Or at least relate. The book was a sort of answer to the riddle of my sphinx. (*TYW*, p. 212)

THE SMILE OF THE LAMB

The power of fiction to transform lives is the central theme of *The Smile of the Lamb*. There are four major characters in the novel: Uri Laniado, a young Israeli of Iraqi origin who burns with the desire to repair the world; Katzman, a career military officer, serving in the Judea and Samaria Command, a survivor of the Holocaust and, therefore, a non-believer in the possibility of repairing either the world or one's own emotional make-up; Shosh Avidan, Uri's wife and Katzman's lover, a case worker at a clinic for delinquent children who brings about the death of one of her young patients by giving his life too much mean-

ing; and Khilmi, a mad old Arab who dwells as an outcast in a small Arab village in Katzman's command, and whose insanity is characterized by the far-fetched stories he tells.

The novel alternates among these four personae, presenting the "matter" of the narrative from four different perspectives. Lest one think, however, that the structure of the novel is therefore straightforward and perhaps even formulaic, slavishly following a prosaic narrative recipe, Grossman seasons his text with hints that an intricate design is being offered here. The first clue we have of the novel's complex composition is that while Uri, Shosh, and Khilmi all speak their chapters in the first person, the chapters that relate to Katzman are presented in the third person. Immediately, the reader is invited to ponder the meaning of the expansion of the structure into an extra dimension, that of an omniscient narrator.

The chapter that finally convinces us to look for meaning in the very structure of the text is Chapter 20 of the novel, devoted ostensibly to Katzman. What characterizes this chapter is a dizzying alternation of narrative frameworks. It begins in a straightforward manner, with an account of the plot: Khilmi has captured Uri, is holding him hostage in his cave, and has issued an "ultimatum" to the Israeli government; Katzman is observed plotting the military strategy which will resolve the situation. All of a sudden, we move from narrative to epistolary novel. Katzman begins a letter in which he tries to explain to Uri about the army's attack on the Arab village of Kalkilya and of Katzman's involvement in the attack. Two sentences into the letter, the scene changes once more, by flashback, to an evening Katzman had spent in the company of Shosh and Uri, playing Scrabble. Abruptly, the Scrabble board becomes the narrative framework. This is a Scrabble that is by no means babble. The meaning of the intricate pattern of words laid down tile by tile by the players bursts through more dramatically than any straightforward narrative might convey.

The chapter proceeds to alternate styles among narrative, confessional letter, and Scrabble game. The Scrabble game hints that we are to look in Katzman's direction and to the global structure of the novel itself for the novel's meaning. Indeed, just as meaning is conveyed by the pattern of the tiles, so too is it conveyed by the very layout of the chapters themselves.

The novel divides itself into 26 chapters that further arrange

themselves into seven distinct groups. Curiously, the arrangement of the first group of four chapters is the same as that of the seventh group, while that of the second group parallels that of the sixth. In this highly structured way, Grossman creates a reverberating poetic effect. This chiasmus permits the fusion of poetical elements by setting up a four-part verbal mirror image in which the outside elements cross through the inside elements to meet each other on the outside once more. What this technique does is to increase the scenic space of the text, to take it beyond the confines of narrative into the realm of meaning.

KHILMI'S ART OF MAKE-BELIEVE

It is Khilmi who sets the tone for the novel. Indeed, we are made aware that, even before the characters had come together to form a novel, Khilmi had adopted the creation of fictions, the art of make-believe, as an instrument for making life bearable. To assuage the pains inflicted by harsh reality — whether from the cruelties of the village's children who throw stones at him or from his perception of the indignities inflicted on an ancient tribal society by a modern power — Khilmi has retreated into the world of *kan-ya-ma-kan*. Grossman uses this expression, the Arabic equivalent of “once upon a time,” as a leitmotiv for the book itself. Only in fiction, Khilmi had learned from experience, is the world tolerable. This is a lesson Khilmi has taught Uri in the literary space that preceded the novel.

Indeed, as the novel opens, *kan-ya-ma-kan* has already had its effect on Uri, who appears initially to be the novel's hero and its narrative voice. He even speaks like an author. No less a self-referential writer than Robbe-Grillet, Uri's very first words in the novel — though not addressed directly to the reader — invite us to adopt a readerly attitude that is antithetical to the conventional requirement of suspension of disbelief:

No, no, believe me, Khilmi, I made them up, all of them. Shosh. . . . Katzman. . . . And even you, Khilmi. You'll be better off as a figment of my imagination, you'll see. (*SOL*, p. 3)

To make things more complicated, Khilmi himself is presented by the narrator as “no more than a *kan-ya-ma-kan*, a fictional inventor of fictions” (*SOL*, p. 7). It is when Uri becomes Uri,

and not a self-conscious narrator, that we learn that, like Khilmi, he has a use for fiction. Although he protests that while Khilmi uses fiction to remember, he uses it to forget, such is not entirely the case. Like Khilmi, he tells stories in order to remember a past that doesn't exist — and never did.

One of the more quaint anecdotes in the novel is the story of Uri's abiding adolescent love for a girl named Ruthy. A soldier in an army barracks, he had fallen in love with Ruthy from afar, through a sentimental correspondence. "A year and half later," he relates, "I found out by chance that in reality Ruthy, the girl of my dreams, was two guys from my company who had been writing to me, using the mailing address of one of them." The telling of this prank reinforces our reading of Uri as *schlemiel*, the one with the smile of the lamb constantly on his face. But the story goes further. "The worst part was that I went on loving her. It was totally irrational. Even when I got out of the army, I couldn't help comparing girls I met to Ruthy, my first love." (*SOL*, pp. 222-23). Obviously, once a fiction has been assimilated, it takes on a life and a reality all its own, no less true and no less affecting than real life. It is less painful to accept the fiction than to abandon it.

For Khilmi, the fiction has a way of eternalizing life, or at least of overcoming death. Khilmi's "son," Yazdi, has become a terrorist and has been killed by an Israeli patrol. Uri has taken it upon himself to be the bearer of the bad news. He watches as Khilmi reacts to the announcement and comments: "He's telling himself a different version of the story, and the strong enzymes of *kan-ya-ma-kan* are even now dissolving his dead son into splashes of color and points of memory which will recombine without the pain, because Yazdi is not dead, there is no death, there is only a sudden flagging of one fiction out of many" (*SOL*, p. 53).

Shosh, the therapist, who feels guilt for the suicide of Mordy, one of her young patients, also uses fiction as an instrument, not to bring Mordy back to life, but as therapy to assuage her feelings of guilt. Every evening since the suicide, Shosh has enclosed herself in her office and has taken to speaking into a tape recorder. She has become, like Khilmi, an oral storyteller. There she confesses that her reports on her patient's case were themselves a fiction. "I lost myself," she recounts, "in a thrilling creative endeavor, as I invented a different Mordy, a lively, co-

operative Mordy" (*SOL*, p. 208). Indeed, the tapes she is recording are nothing but story.

She even calls herself "Sheherazade," and the king to whom she tells these stories so that he will let her live come next morning is Shosh's father, Abner, a poet who once pontificated that "every fiction has a core of absolute truth" (*SOL*, p. 137).

KATZMAN'S CENTRALITY

Katzman, not exactly Shosh's lover and even less precisely Uri's commanding officer, is, unlike them, not a Sabra, and was not brought up with the redemptive rhetoric of Zionism mixed in with his mother's milk. A survivor of the Holocaust, Katzman has come to the conclusion that it is impossible to repair the world, and that the only way to live with the human condition is to anesthetize oneself against all human emotions.

All this is not to say that Katzman is foreign to idealism and, consequently, to fiction. On the contrary, Katzman has been immersed in fiction since childhood, not through his mother's milk but through his father's literary obsessions. During the war, Katzman was in hiding with his father, a scholar who was writing a book on the moral parallels between the *Orlando Furioso*, a sixteenth-century epic poem by Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto, and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. In a manner similar to the way Cervantes sets up a causal relationship between fiction and madness, Ariosto posits a correlation between love and insanity. Katzman has learned, both from his father's texts and from the Holocaust, to be wary, therefore, of both love and fiction. As Katzman understands his father's enterprise, fiction may be put to use by someone who will look at life squarely. Interpreting his father's message, Katzman concludes: "If I understand correctly, what he meant was that the enemy is in ourselves" (*SOL*, p. 179)

Katzman, the soldier and the non-poet, is no less bookish than Abner, the poet and essayist of the Zionist idea. But Katzman feels contempt for Shosh's father and for his involvement in politics. "Politics for him," explains the anonymous narrator of Katzman's chapters, "was merely a stage play without any bearing on real life" (*SOL*, p. 146). Obviously, Katzman's critique is not of politicians but of ideologues, whom he accuses, no less than Shosh, of creating impossible worlds. There is, nev-

ertheless, a type of fiction that Katzman finds attractive. This is the fiction that engages itself with real life as it is lived, that engages itself with — one would perhaps not be going too far to insert here Ozick's formula — “behavior and the consequences of behavior.”

What characterizes Katzman's reading is “his sensitivity, his empathy and willingness to suffer with literary characters” (*SOL*, p. 83). One of his favorite authors is Albert Camus and his favorite novel is Camus's *The Plague*. His favorite line in the novel is Tarrou's declaration: “It is tiresome to be infected but even more tiresome not to want to be so.” Tarrou, drawn to catastrophe, is the real artist for Katzman. And Katzman has tried to draw an analogy for Uri between artists and people drawn to disaster “It's a compulsion with them. . . . Like the compulsion an artist has to paint. An urge to put things right. A deep, true sense of symmetry” (*SOL*, p. 223).

It is obviously no coincidence that Grossman has situated the initial meeting between Katzman and Uri in an Italian town devastated by an earthquake to which both of them had been drawn as volunteers. Both Katzman and Uri imitate Camus's Tarrou, going out of their way to fight catastrophe.

Returned to Israel, Katzman re-enlists in the army. Uri decides to become his own one-man Peace Corps; after the experience of the earthquake in Italy, he looks for further catastrophe in Israel and finds it in the plight of the Arabs living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

But this book is not only about Uri and his simplistic smile. It is also about Katzman, who sees things more clearly and through a more complex lens, the lens not of epic poetry but of tragedy. He looks at the situation in Israel with honesty and sincerity.

. . . Katzman did what army personnel and Israeli civilians alike were normally prevented from doing — he carefully and honestly considered his attitudes toward the conquered territories. He didn't hate the Arabs he lived with side by side. He didn't love them either. He didn't want to go on occupying their territories, but an independent Palestinian state, fueled only by its hatred for Israel, was pretty frightening. (*SOL*, p. 147)

Katzman comes to the conclusion, depressing in the extreme, that there is no way out of the dilemma. In this way Grossman's

novel reaches the tragic dimensions not of Camus's *The Plague* but of his other masterpiece, *The Stranger*.

A MIDRASH ON THE STRANGER

Grossman's novel may be read as a rewriting of, a midrash on, *The Stranger*, a novel situated in Algeria during the French colonial period, in which the central character, Meursault, pulls the trigger on an Arab who is threatening him with a knife. Meursault has not shot in self-defense — he fires three shots — not out of hatred, but rather to assuage some inner, meta-physical pain. In the crucial Chapter 20 of Grossman's novel, discussed previously, we are told that Katzman had acted similarly in the action at Kalkilya. Katzman is asked to explain his actions by no less a figure in Israeli history than Moshe Dayan:

The man with the patch over his eye, with the doll face and the hollow voice, asked Katzman why he'd gone on shelling so long. . . . Throughout the violent shelling, he said, he had been trying to assuage the pain inside him, the pain that was still inside him now. . . . "This war. All the destruction. The killing. I couldn't stand it anymore. . . ." Katzman shook himself and wrote on the page before him: "Dayan interrogated me about the shelling with the greatest interest. I told him it gave me relief, because it was an act of protest." (*SOL*, p. 255)

How exactly is this aggressive behavior an act of protest? How is it not to be condemned? The difference between Katzman on the one hand and Uri and Khilmi on the other is that by the time we have reached the present of the novel Katzman has transcended protest. He has come to the conclusion that the most dangerous of fictions is the belief in absolute justice. Reflecting on Khilmi's abduction of Uri as an act of protest, aided by Uri, who agrees to become a sacrificial lamb as his act of protest, Katzman muses: "Uri and the old man are fighting back. I know it. They're fighting back against me. They're talking absolute values. Either the army withdraws from all the territories, or else — Uri dies. They're demanding justice. Justice pure and simple" (*SOL*, p. 190). But Katzman has learned that absolute justice, like all ideologies, is dangerous. He uses the metaphor of Don Quixote's windmills. "The really insidious

windmills," he asserts, "are justice, reason, and progressive politics. Any moral system we take pride in." (*SOL*, p. 179)

What then is the meaning of the novel's final chapter, in which Khilmi, having enticed Katzman up to his cave to "rescue" Uri, shoots, not Uri, but Katzman? It is not at all certain from the novel whether Katzman dies from this shot. Nevertheless, in shooting Katzman, and not Uri, Khilmi becomes another version of both Katzman and Meursault, a person who finds relief not in fiction but in the trigger of a revolver.

David Grossman, in *The Smile of the Lamb*, seems to be making an effort to universalize the Meursault phenomenon. He appears to be articulating the statement that there are many Meursaults in the world; sometimes they are called Katzman and sometimes they are called Khilmi.

The question remains: Is David Grossman a Jewish writer, one who uses fiction to Jewish ends? For all its universalizing, the novel does lead us to the threshold of Jewish particularism. As this essay has tried in part to demonstrate, one of Grossman's main interests in the novel has been to understand how the Jewish historical experience has led a man like Katzman to become a Meursault. But what makes a person Jewish is not only his or her immersion in Jewish history; it is also a matter of looking at life in a certain way. Early in the novel, Grossman hints that there is something very Jewish going on. Katzman, when he was in hiding in an underground cave with his father during the Holocaust, had learned to become a "cautious decoder," one who is able, from his underground hiding place, to "conjecture the world above on the flimsiest of evidence" (*SOL*, p. 20). Grossman's Hebrew text calls this decoder a "*mefa'aneah tzefanim*," that is, an interpreter of hidden things. And yet, while the term *mefa'aneah* alludes to the biblical Joseph, who was an interpreter of dreams for the sake of heaven — called by Pharaoh *Tzofnat Pa'neah* — Katzman, as we have seen, does not use his interpretive capacity exclusively to Jewish ends.

In this novel David Grossman's useful fictions are not yet useful for a Jewish analysis of life. It is only in *See Under: Love*, Grossman's next novel — and his masterpiece — that the novelist will move from the position of a universalist conjecturer of the world to become a Jewish interpreter of it, as he develops the art of make-believe into an art of redemption.