

# THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS

VOLUME 47, NUMBER 17 · NOVEMBER 2, 2000

## Sentenced to Reality

By Anthony Hecht

*Open Closed Open* by Yehuda Amichai, Translated from the Hebrew by Chana Bloch, by Chana Kronfeld; Harcourt, 184 pp., \$25.00

*This review was composed before the untimely death of Mr. Amichai on September 22, 2000, at the age of seventy-six.*

### 1.

It took Yehuda Amichai roughly ten years to write *Open Closed Open*, a suite of poems, or more truly, a long poem divided and subdivided into sections, but thematically and musically braided beautifully into something like symphonic unity and grandeur. It may be thought of as a brilliant enlargement of a major poem written earlier in the poet's career, "Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tudela"; but whereas that was a moderately long poem dealing with much of the same materials, at least as they regard the poet's biography, this new work is nothing less than an heroic achievement of the spirit, a lofty and sometimes raucous meditation on the history of his nation, his faith, and his heart. As the earlier poem was not implausibly compared to Wordsworth's *The Prelude*,<sup>[1]</sup> which is subtitled *The Growth of a Poet's Mind*, *Open Closed Open* may be regarded as an account of the composition, the piecing together out of fragments, of the poet's soul. It is as deeply spiritual a poem as any I have read in modern times, not excluding Eliot's *Four Quartets*, or anything to be found in the works of professional religionists. It is an incomparable triumph. Be immediately assured that this does not mean devoid of humor, or without a rich sense of comedy. There is, in fact, an important ingredient of irreverence that plays a central part in the poet's deepest meditations.

It may be claimed that irony—even, on occasion, an irony attributed to the behavior of God—is a central element in the Old Testament; one need point only to the Books of Jonah and Job. And the sacred commen-

taries are almost equally ironic. There is a Jewish tradition of "religious irony" which, I think, has no true Christian parallel. To be sure, there are little moments of jest, as in the pun on Peter's name (though this jest has become a point of bitter contention between Catholics and Protestants); and Christian theology, as well as scripture, is certainly rich in paradox. The Christian irony that the most perfect of "men" should be singled out for excruciating punishment and death is somehow either veiled or mitigated by its turning out to be, in the end, a foreordained part of a redemptive plan to which the sacrificial victim assented with full knowledge of the salvational benefits his death would confer. But Jewish irony, the meditative fruit of the patriarchs and prophets, the psalmists and scribes, is often given to levity, though no less serious for all that.

In "Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tudela" (the first Benjamin was a twelfth-century traveler who wrote an account of a journey through Europe, Asia Minor, and Africa; the last is Amichai himself, who in the course of his career covered much of the globe), we encounter this passage:

*eight empty bullet-shells for a Hanukkah menorah,  
explosives of eternal flame, the cross of a crossfire,  
a submachine gun carried in phylactery straps,  
camouflage nets of thin lacy material  
from girlfriends' panties, used womens' dresses  
and ripped diapers to clean the cannon mouth,  
offensive hand-grenades in the shape of bells,  
defensive hand-grenades in the shape of a spice box  
for the close of the Sabbath, sea mines*

*like prickly apples used as smelling-salts on Yom Kippur  
in case of fainting....*<sup>[2]</sup>

The profanation of the sacred as described here can only have meaning if the sacred is genuinely revered; and Amichai's attitude toward the sacred is both devout and skeptical at once. It is deeply tied to his devotion to his parents, both Orthodox Jews, who brought him to Palestine from the Bavarian city of Würzburg, where he was born in 1924. The move took place in 1936, but before this he had been given Orthodox schooling, learning Hebrew prayers at the age of four or five. His filial devotion is expressed in this new work in passages one of which begins, "My mother was a prophet and didn't know it," and another, "My father was God and didn't know it."

Speaking of the Hebrew language, Amichai has observed, "Every word we use carries in and of itself connotations from the Bible, the Siddur, the Midrash, the Talmud. Every word reverberates through the halls of Jewish history."<sup>[3]</sup> That history in its four-thousand-year totality is something the poet has immersed himself in, and it appears in every aspect of his thought and language. This is a matter for which there is no Christian equivalent. The New Testament is known in translations from the Greek original, though Jesus spoke Aramaic. There have been celebrated theologians whose expositions have been based on philological speculations regarding the density and compactness of tropes, often the most ingenious and imaginative kind, from the Latin or the Greek. In his sermons, John Donne speaks as though he took for granted that all of Holy Scripture was set down in Latin. And J.H. North, in *The Classic Preachers of the English Church*, characterizes Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, who was fascinated by words, their origins, their richness of implication, both in Latin and in Greek scripture, thus: "...He rolls his text like a sweet morsel under his tongue, until he has extracted from it not only all its nourishment but the very last vestige of its flavor."<sup>[4]</sup> But the Hebrew language in all essentials is very much the language of Moses and the prophets; and for a Jew drenched in the sacred texts, as Amichai is, all history, all sanctity, all sin and suffering resonate with holy language.

## 2.

*Open Closed Open* is composed of twenty-two sections, each with its own title; these sections, in turn,

are subdivided into varying numbers of parts. The whole is introduced by a "prelude" called "The Amen Stone," and concludes with a "postlude" about the same stone, two superimposed photographs of which appear on the front of the dust jacket. The stone is a fragment, "one survivor fragment/of the thousands upon thousands of bits of broken tombstones/in Jewish graveyards." It rested on the poet's desk, and is a memorial to every fragmentation of Jewish history, to the fragment of Holocaust survivors, and even to the promise in Ezekiel of the reassembling of scattered bones. The stone Amichai owns bears the solitary word "Amen," which means, "May it come to pass."

The book's title, as the valuable notes explain, derives from a rabbinic tale, or, rather, from a passage in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Niddah, chapter 3, folio 30a. It reads in part:

Unto what may the fetus in its mother's womb be likened? Unto a notebook that is folded up. Its hands rest on its temples, elbows on thighs, heels against buttocks, its head lies between its knees. Its mouth is closed and its navel is open.... When it comes forth into the air of the world, what is closed opens and what is open closes.

The twenty-two sections themselves do not make up a narrative, but rather the fragments of a narrative, or of several narratives, including the life of the poet, revealed in fugitive glimpses, the history of the Jews, the lives, and still more movingly, the deaths of others. The very first section is titled "I Wasn't One of the Six Million: And What Is My Life Span? Open Closed Open." The poem proceeds in a jumble of meditations upon remembering and forgetting, a Joseph's coat of many-colored styles, from liturgy, scripture, post-biblical history, formularies, and even parodies of sacred texts. It employs passages that sound like popular lyrics, slogans, and an amusing equivalent of a college cheer: "Torah, Torah, rah, rah, rah!" as well as the following rather jazzy passage:

*King Saul never learned how to play or to sing  
nor was he taught how to be king.  
Oh he's got the blues,  
he's nothing to lose  
but the moody tune  
on his gramophone  
and David is its name-oh, David is its name,  
its name its name its name.*

Throughout the poem the sacred is brought into blunt confrontation with the profane. After a particularly jubilant party that took place at the house of a friend, with much dancing, singing, and celebratory noise, the poet observes,

*The last to leave  
greet the first to pray at dawn—some at the synagogue,  
others at the prayer houses of remembering and forgetting.*

Only a little later we come upon these lines:

*And from the distance, like the sound of a ping-pong game:  
belief in one God and blasphemy rally with each other.*

Amichai has occasion elsewhere to refer to Gods in the plural, though in this case no blasphemy is entailed, since one of the Hebrew names of God, *Elohim*, is plural in form, presumably betokening the Lord's omnipresence and omnipotence.<sup>[5]</sup>

The personal and biographical aspects of the poem are, once again, fragmentarily, and rather shyly, introduced. The poet's love for his parents is richly and beautifully described, and is touched by (tainted by?) his feeling that in renouncing Jewish Orthodoxy, he has betrayed his father's love, and perhaps rebelled against God. He was taken by his parents from his Bavarian birthplace in 1936, when he was twelve, but not before he had fallen in love with a girl who would come to haunt his poetry over many years. Her name was Ruth, she suffered a severe accident that cost her a leg, and she was subsequently annihilated with all the rest of Würzburg's Jewish community. When Amichai was thirty-five he returned for the first time to his birthplace to revisit the sites of his childhood, almost all of them destroyed in the course of the war. Ruth makes a moving appearance late in *Open Closed Open*.

It may be said that Jerusalem, his not altogether happy home, elicits amused or sardonic responses from him. It has, in these late days, become a center for academic/religious conferences and symposia:

*...a major conference on Job:  
dermatologists on skin diseases, anthropologists  
on pain and suffering, legal scholars on justice and injustice,  
God on the nature of Satan, and Satan on the notion of the divine.  
Job's three friends, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar, on the psychol-  
ogy  
of suicide, the science of suicidology....*

*and ceramicists on the type of potsherd Job used  
to scratch himself.*

Elsewhere, of his city, he writes:

*Jerusalem is a merry-go-round-and-round....  
And instead of elephants and painted horses to ride,  
there are religions that go up and down and turn on their axis  
to the music of oily tunes from the houses of prayer.*

*They speak with bells in their voices  
and with the wailing call of the muezzin, and at their bedside,  
empty shoes at the entrance of a mosque. And on the doorpost of  
their house  
it says, "Ye shall love each other with all your hearts and with all  
your  
souls."*

And then there is battle. The Old Testament is full of it; post-biblical history is full of it, as is modern history, and Amichai saw battle in Egypt and Palestine. From earlier poems we know that, without seeming to boast, he was able to recount the truly heroic rescue of a comrade who later died in his arms in June 1948. He fought in the Jewish War of Independence, serving in the Palmach, commando units of the Haganah, the Israeli underground army.

*Ifell in battle at Ashdod  
In the War of Independence. My mother said then,  
He's twenty-four,  
Now she says, he's fifty-four  
And she lights a candle of remembrance  
Like birthday candles  
You blow out on a cake.  
Since then my father died in pain and sorrow.*

*Since then my house is my grave and my grave is my house,  
For I fell in the pale sands of Ashdod.*

*I carried my comrade on my back.  
Since then I always feel his dead body  
Like a weighted heaven upon me,  
Since then he feels my arched back under him,  
Like an arched segment of the earth's crust.  
For I fell in the terrible sands of Ashdod  
Not only him.<sup>[6]</sup>*

("Me-az")

In *Open Close Open* this occasion is only briefly and evasively alluded to:

*I always have to revisit the sands of Ashdod  
where I had a little bit of courage in that battle, that war,  
soft hero in the soft sand. My few scraps of heroism I squandered  
then.*

And then, a recurrent theme, a sonorous reverberation, there is the need, the curse, the duty of remembering and forgetting:

To the confession "We have sinned, we have betrayed" I would add

the words "We have forgotten, we have remembered"—two sins that cannot be atoned for. They ought to cancel each other out but instead they reinforce one another. Yes, I'm kosher.

The antepenultimate section of the poem is called "My Son Was Drafted." To one who himself served in the most terrible battles, who is now a father of two sons and a daughter, the prospect of the conscription of a son into the Israeli army of our day, when international dangers are daily threats, would provoke an understandable anxiety, and Amichai reacts with characteristic humor and irony:

*I want my son to be a soldier in the Italian army  
with a crest of colorful feathers on his cap,  
happily dashing around with no enemies, no camouflage.*

*I want my son to be a soldier in the Vatican's Swiss Guard  
with their coats of many colors, their sashes and blunt lances  
glittering in the sun.*

*I want my son to be a soldier in the British army,  
guarding a palace in the rain. A tall fur hat on his head,  
everyone staring at him while, without moving a muscle,  
he is laughing inside.*

This fine mockery of the soldierly profession as all pageantry (though, to be sure, grand pageantry in Michelangelo-motley, *bersagliere* or busby headgear) is touching, and also impressive when it comes from someone who has seen long and dangerous duty, and who had written in an earlier part of this poem:

*Tova's brother, whom I carried wounded from the battle of Tel  
Gath,  
recovered and was forgotten because he recovered, and died  
in a car accident a few years later, and was forgotten  
because he died.*

This is part of a litany of tributes to the departed, including the great Jewish poet Paul Celan, Romanian-born, whose parents were deported and shot in 1941, who himself was incarcerated in a German forced labor camp, and who, after the war, settled in Paris and eventually drowned himself in the Seine. It is in this section that Ruth makes her appearance among the lamented dead. These encounters with the ghosts of the past in the course of a major, and, indeed, heroic poem, serve to recall those descents into the underworld we identify with the epics of Homer, Virgil, and Dante.

### 3.

The sense of epic proportions and associations is certainly not based on length. As printed, the poem runs to 173 pages, which, while vastly longer than *The Waste Land*, cannot nearly match *The Cantos*, let alone the great classics. But in its reach, in the depth of its feeling, the richness of its variety, and the dignity of its most solemn moments, it seems to invite epic associations, as, to my mind, it does in the following passage:

*The glory passes. Thus they pass, the psalms,  
crying singing cursing blessing—verses  
from the mouths of worshippers: Happy is the man,  
Like a tree planted, Happy are they that dwell  
in Thy house, All men are false, Servants of the Lord,  
My Rock and Redeemer, David and the sons of Korah, hallelujahs,  
green pastures, still waters, dark valleys of death.  
Thus they pass, like a parade when the circus comes to town  
but won't stop, won't open the big tent, elephants  
and other animals, the mea culpa band  
drumming their chests, the we-have-sinned tumblers  
and the we-have-betrayed dancers, tightrope walkers, acrobats  
hopping Holy, Holy, Holy  
with sobs and laughter, bitter cries and sweet song.  
Thus it all passes—what was, and what never has been.  
Thus the children parade on Arbor Day  
with seedlings they won't ever plant,  
thus they pass, thus glory passes.*

*Thus glory passes, like a long train without  
beginning or end, without cause or purpose. I always  
stand to one side at the crossing—the barrier is down—  
and I take it all in: carloads of passengers and history, carloads  
packed full of war, carloads teeming with human beings  
for extermination, windows with faces of parting  
men and women, the high spirits of travelers,  
birthdays and deathdays, pleading  
and pity and plenty of empty echoing boxcars.*

Not much later, the poet ruminates upon the *deus absconditus*, the Hidden God, the God who, having spoken to Adam and to Moses, having appeared to the prophets and debated with Abraham, became increasingly veiled until, in Micah 3, it is declared that all prophets are now benighted, and "they shall all cover their lips: for there is no answer of God."

*When God packed up and left the country, He left the Torah  
with the Jews. They have been looking for Him ever since,  
shouting, "Hey, you forgot something, you forgot,"  
and other people think shouting is the prayer of the Jews.  
Since then, they've been combing the Bible for hints of His  
whereabouts, as it says: "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found,  
call ye upon Him while he is near." But He is far away.*

*There are days when everyone says, I was there,  
I'm ready to testify, I stood a few feet from the accident,  
from the bomb, from the crucifixion, I almost got hit, almost got  
crucified. I saw the faces of the bride and groom under the wed-  
ding canopy and  
almost rejoiced. When David lay with Bathsheba I was the voyeur,  
I happened to be there on the roof fixing the pipes, taking down a  
flag. With my own eyes I saw the Chanukah miracle in the Temple,  
I saw General Allenby entering Jaffa Gate,  
I saw God.  
And then there are days when everything is an alibi: wasn't there,  
didn't hear, heard the explosion only from a distance and ran  
away, saw smoke but  
was reading a newspaper, was staying in some other place.  
I didn't see God, I've got witnesses.*

However skeptical, however irreverent, mocking, mischievous, and, to some readers, nearly impious this poet may seem, there can't be the least doubt that he was obsessed with the religious life in all its aspects as something lived and experienced in every waking moment of his life. And this means that if credence and credulity are held up for ironic questioning, so equally is the world of empirical and analytic experience:

*People were always telling me: "You've got to live  
in the real world." I heard it from parents and teachers.  
To live in the real world, like a verdict. What terrible sin  
could these souls have committed  
that their lives in this world should begin with a verdict:  
You are sentenced to reality for life.  
With no possibility of parole.  
The parole is death.*

The two translators, Chana Bloch and Chana Kornfeld, who enjoyed the active cooperation and assistance of Amichai himself, and of his wife, have performed more than a commendable job. Though I do not know the poem in its original, we have the poet's oversight as certification for its accuracy (and Amichai spoke fluent English). The English version of the poem is vivid with living idiom, and is so astonishingly varied in tone, so multileveled in implication, so full of puns and verbal exuberance, that it brilliantly conveys great depths of feeling, a wide and generous knowledge of scripture, of ancient and modern history, of all the poet's countless resources. It succeeds as a poem in English, and does so in ways that persuade us that it must be those very ways in which the Hebrew succeeds: in making the reader feel that the total sum of these assembled fragments cohere in spirit and in art, leaving the reader awed, delighted, and profoundly grateful.<sup>[7]</sup>

The poet's work is gently, modestly, amusedly heroic, and in its assembled totality it is nothing less than majestic. It is, moreover, unlike any poem from the past or present that I can think of. It does honor not only to the poet, and what he made of feeling, thought, cerebral cortex, cardiac chambers, his knowledge and his life, but to his people, celebrated here in loving, equivocal terms, and, in the poet's very name, Amichai, which, in Hebrew, means "my people's lives."

## Notes

- [1] Glenda Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai* (State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 18.
- [2] *Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Harper and Row, 1986), p. 82.
- [3] Quoted in Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*, p. 14.
- [4] Quoted from Maurice F. Reidy, S.J., *Bishop Lancelot Andrewes: Jacobean Court Preacher* (Loyola University Press, 1955), p. 62.
- [5] "The two primary principles of God's dealings with nations and individuals are...Justice and Mercy (which includes Love). These two attributes, according to rabbinic interpretation, are represented respectively by the two divine names, *Elohim* ('God') and YHWH (usually rendered, 'the Lord')." Isidore Epstein, *Judaism: A Historical Presentation* (Penguin Books, 1959), p. 135.
- [6] Quoted by Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*, pp. 28-29.
- [7] I have found one small error, which may well be the fault of an editor. The note on the section named "Conferences, Conferences..." No. 11, page 151, applies instead to an eleventh fragment on page 159. This, with its important echo of the closing verses of Ecclesiastes, needs to be corrected in later editions.